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What Are Students Perceptions Of Their First-Year Experience In Relation To Support They
Receive From The Fashion Institute of Technology

By

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Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Doctor of Philosophy
Seton Hall University

2014

SETON HALL UNIVERSITY
COLLEGE OF EDUCATION AND HUMAN SERVICES
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APPROVAL FOR SUCCESSFUL DEFENSE

Doctoral Candidate, **Joshua Wilkin**, has successfully defended and made the required modifications to the text of the doctoral dissertation for the **Ph.D.** during this **Fall Semester 2014**.

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By

Joshua Jacob Wilkin

Abstract

Student affairs professionals view the first-year experience as a beneficial program that assists college students with their academic and personal development. While there have been many qualitative studies (Meyer, Spencer, & French, 2009; Stebleton, Jensen, & Peter, 2010; Corella, 2010) and quantitative studies (Hendel, 2007; Woolsey & Miller, 2009; Morrow & Ackerman, 2012) regarding first-year experience programs, much of this research has focused on retention instead of how students' experiences can be affected by their sense of belonging to their particular institution.

The purpose of this study was to investigate students' perceptions of their first-year experience in relation to support they receive from the Fashion Institute of Technology (FIT), a State University of New York (SUNY) college of art, business, design, and technology connected to the fashion industry. Through qualitative methods, I interviewed 30 students (10 first-years, 10 second-years, and 10 third-years) of the approximately 2,300 undergraduates who live on FIT's campus in Manhattan (Fashion Institute of Technology, 2013).

The results from this study have indicated FIT needs to improve relationships within the campus community, augment communicative support to its students regarding its programs and services, and seek input from students about the services they feel would increase their sense of belonging and improve their experience. Establishing, implementing, and evaluating this first-year experience program will be an extensive endeavor that will take time; however, this program could lead to improved student satisfaction with FIT, which could increase students' sense of belonging and support.

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I would like to thank my parents, Gregory and Candace Wilkin, as well as my sisters, Rachel and Hannah Wilkin. My parents and sisters always encouraged me, provided guidance, and were a great listening outlet while I pursued this degree. They have inspired me and always supported my endeavors, which has shaped me and allowed me to grow in ways I could not have imagined.

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Lastly, I would be remiss if I did not mention the ELMP faculty and my fellow colleagues within Seton Hall University. The camaraderie, challenges, and support I have received have provided me with a thrilling rollercoaster of a ride I will never forget.

Dedication

I dedicate this study to my parents, Gregory and Candace Wilkin. Both of you have provided me with instrumental support and always allowed me to be who I want to be while allowing me to choose my own path. I could not have asked for better parents and am proud to have you both in my life.

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Chapter I

Introduction

Administrators in higher education are frequently monitoring students' perceptions to develop innovative, effective ways to improve their experiences, especially among first-year students. The term "first-year experience," as advocated by the National Resource Center for the First Year Experience and Students in Transition at the University of South Carolina, describes a comprehensive and intentional approach to a student's first year of college that comprises both curricular and co- curricular initiatives (Upcraft, Gardner, & Barefoot, 2005). Colleges and universities have been offering these kinds of first-year experience programs (also known as a seminar/experience program or course) for decades to acclimate and increase the retention of students new to college life.

The Fashion Institute of Technology, generally known as FIT, has yet to implement such a program. FIT is a State University of New York (SUNY) college of art, business, design, and technology connected to the fashion industry, with approximately 2,300 students living on its urban campus in Manhattan (Fashion Institute of Technology, 2013). In 2012, FIT's president announced the college would refresh its strategic plan, titled "Our Legacy; Our Future: FIT Beyond 2020." One of the stated goals is to commit to a culture of student-centeredness; therefore, FIT has decided to focus on the first-year experience. It is outlined thusly:

At FIT, a student's experience during the first year is a major factor in the decision to persist to a degree. Accordingly, the College will develop a first-year structured program to address student development skills and issues such as stress management, time management, career assessment, study skills, academic advisement, and an introduction to college (20/20: FIT at 75, Bringing the Future into Focus, Section 3, 2010).

All 27 SUNY institutions, including FIT, administer a survey called the Student Opinion Survey (Office of Institutional Research, 2013). FIT administers this survey every three years to collect information on students' satisfaction with their academic experiences, student support services, and campus resources and programs. This information is used in the strategic planning process, as well as in academic and administrative improvement efforts. While FIT has a first-year student retention rate of 85%, there are issues of concern. In the most current Student Opinion Survey (2012), FIT ranked in the bottom half of SUNY schools for all items measuring student satisfaction with various campus services. Only 59% of FIT students felt a sense of belonging to the campus (ranked 14th). Only 67% percent of FIT students were satisfied with the level of respect non-teaching staff showed to students (ranked 25th), compared with 76% of other SUNY students, on average. Sixty-four percent of FIT students were satisfied with the institute's billing and payment processes (ranked 14th), and 59% of these students were satisfied with FIT's career planning services (ranked 14th). Fifty-seven percent of FIT students were satisfied with financial aid services (ranked 16th); 55% were satisfied with general academic advising (ranked 21st); and only half were satisfied with the course registration process (ranked 21st). Lastly, FIT ranked 24th on major-specific academic advising, with 59% of students reporting satisfaction, compared with 68% of other SUNY students, on average.

FIT's administrators are aware of these issues, which is why their current strategic plan outlines developing a first-year experience program for students. Because FIT has not defined what it wants in a first-year experience program, this exploratory study will provide insight into what students would find beneficial in this initiative, e.g. types of services, components, and programs that could lead to an increased sense of belonging to the institution and improved campus environment for students.

Purpose of the Study

Student affairs professionals view the first-year experience as a beneficial program that assists college students with their academic and personal development. While there have been many qualitative studies (Meyer, Spencer, & French, 2009; Stebleton, Jensen, & Peter, 2010; Corella, 2010) and quantitative studies (Hendel, 2007; Woolsey & Miller, 2009; Morrow & Ackerman, 2012) regarding first-year experience programs, much of this research has focused on retention instead of how students' experiences can be affected by their sense of belonging to their particular institution.

This study augments the results from these and other studies and demonstrates the importance of using students' perceptions to improve the first-year experience and increase students' sense of belonging to the institution. The results in this study could be used to create a first-year experience program at FIT that would meet students' needs, as well as providing valuable input as to what is needed to improve services and sense of belonging for all students at the institution. While the purpose of this study is not solely focused on retention, it is important to show that the implementation of a first-year experience program has the potential to increase retention. Additionally, gathering input from students regarding what they would like to see in a first-year experience program could help other institutions to alter or develop programs to better focus on students' needs and cut areas of the program that students do not find valuable.

Research Questions

The research questions guiding this study ask the following: What are students' perceptions of the first-year experience in relation to the support they receive from the Fashion Institute of Technology?

Subsidiary/Guiding Questions

1. What types of social, academic, and financial support are available for first-year students at FIT?
2. What challenges do FIT students experience in their first year, and how could a first-year experience program lessen these challenges?

Significance of the Study

First-year experience programs are a very important function of the university system. Several previously mentioned quantitative studies have indicated these types of programs are critical for students because they give them the opportunity to transition successfully to their new college or university surroundings (Tsui & Gao, 2007; Woosley & Miller, 2009). This researcher feels there is a need to investigate student perceptions of these programs because students, arguably, are the most important piece in the university system. Using students' feedback regarding what they want to see in a first-year experience program will allow administrators at FIT to create a first-year experience program that could increase students' feelings of belonging to the institute. In addition, I explored data not just from first-year students, but from second- and third-year students as well, which is a unique aspect to this study. These data could also be shared with other institutions that are looking to create or augment their first-year experience programs to improve student services.

Definition of Terms

First-year experience: A program or seminar that is designed to acclimate a student to college life (Greenfield, Keup, & Gardner, 2013, p. xxx).

First-year seminar: A course for new undergraduate students designed to enhance their academic and social integration into college (Greenfield et al., 2013, p. 89).

Learning community: A set of two or more classes that are linked or clustered during an academic term, often around an interdisciplinary theme, and that enroll a common cohort of students (Habley, Bloom, & Robbins, 2012, p. 315).

Orientation: An event that is time constrained and typically precedes the beginning of classes (Habley et al., p. 315).

Outside commitments: Co-curricular activities and job responsibilities outside of academic-related responsibilities.

Peer mentoring: A form of mentorship that usually takes place between a person who has lived through a specific experience (peer mentor) and a person who is new to that experience (the peer mentee) (Greenfield et al., 2013, p. 71).

Social constructivism: A theory of knowledge used in both sociology and communication that examines the development of a jointly constructed understanding of the world. It assumes that understanding, significance, and meaning are developed not separately within the individual, but in coordination with other human beings (Leeds-Hurwitz, 2009, pp. 892-895).

Chapter II

Literature Review

Educators and researchers perceive and define first-year programs very differently, making exact terminology difficult. Habley, Bloom, and Robbins (2012) state:

The first-year experience program is an umbrella term for a complex and wide variety of practices and approaches ... our response to this challenge was to categorically define first-year experience program using the terms orientation, learning communities, and first-year seminar (p. 330).

When discussing a first-year experience program, I will be referring to programs that have an orientation component and/or learning community component and/or first-year seminar component. The purpose of this literature review will be to focus on the first-year experience program, as overarchingly defined above, and how it affects students' retention, grade point average (GPA), peer mentoring, and perceptions of the program itself.

First-Year Experience Programs

In the decades since colleges and universities began offering first-year experience programs, many aspects have changed, including the emphasis on training faculty and staff to teach these valuable programs. This has been of prime importance because one of the major goals of the programs is to create a more personal relationship between the instructor and the student so the latter feels better acclimated to the college setting (Gordon, 1989).

Tsui and Gao (2007) conducted research on the efficacy of first-year experience programs using case study data that were collected through a series of site visits to four small-sized institutions. Results from comparative analyses of the four case studies support the efficacy of first-year experience programs, as measured by the active learning and critical

thinking development they provide. Principles that customarily underlie these programs – for example, small class size and an emphasis on depth over breadth of material – seem to make this type of program format especially conducive to the practice of active learning methods.

Evidence from this study suggests that incorporating active learning techniques into first-year experience programs is positively linked to critical thinking development, alongside other desired outcomes. This study also found that interviewees at each of the four case study institutions frequently identified these programs as a particularly powerful way to augment student cognitive growth. According to Tsui and Gao (2007), “Fostering student success in the freshman year is the most important effort an institution can undertake in its attempt to boost student persistence” (p. 163).

Hendel (2007) conducted research on first-year experience programs at a large research university using the Student Experiences Survey, an eight-page survey containing 92 questions on the following topics: overall satisfaction levels and overall assessment of educational quality; evaluation of courses, instructors, and advising; campus experiences (e.g., experienced sense of community) and time commitments; evaluation of specific campus services; and plans and expectations. The more positive responses from the survey came from students enrolled in a first-year experience program. Results of the survey showed attending a first-year experience program did not indicate a better overall experience as compared with students not enrolled in a first-year experience program. However, students enrolled in a first-year experience program had indicated they had experienced a better sense of community their first year. The study also indicated the positive effects of participating in a first-year experience program may not emerge until later in a student’s pathway to graduation, which is particularly important at the study institution because significant attrition occurs from the second to the third year and from the

third to the fourth year. According to Hendel, “Ultimately, an institution is concerned about graduation rate, so the true test of the value of a first-year experience program is the extent to which participation increases the probability that the student will graduate from the institution” (p. 421). A nice feature of the study is that it viewed the effects of the program past a student’s second year of study. One caveat, however, is that students had a choice to enroll in the program. This could have affected the results because these particular students were taking more initiative and actively looking for new challenges and experiences as compared with students not enrolled in the program.

Barton and Donahue (2010) conducted multiple assessments of a first-year seminar pilot at the University of Maine at Farmington, an undergraduate-only public liberal arts college. There were three types of seminars in which students could participate. About half of the incoming students were accommodated in available seminars. Students not taking a first-year seminar participated in either the one-week, one-credit summer experience or the fall four-credit orientation course. The one-week course focused on college transition, orientation, and success. The one-credit summer experience focused on college transition, orientation, joining an intellectual community, and acclimation to the college environment. The four-credit seminar focused on academic transition to college, developing habits of lifelong learning, critical reading, reasoning, writing, thinking across disciplines, and self-awareness. The authors of the study analyzed the differences between the participants in each seminar using four datasets: 1) student retention, 2) academic performance, 3) intellectual development during the first semester, and 4) student expectations and attitudes about college (p. 263). The authors then tested the hypothesis that completion of a first-year seminar improved student success, retention, engagement, and attitudes beyond the enhancement offered by the other first-year experience courses. Results

from the study indicated that retention of students was not significantly associated with the first-year experience for any seminar. For academic performance, students in the first-year seminar scored a significantly higher GPA than those in the one-credit orientation course. However, this result could be attributed to the type of students who participated because they were able to choose their seminar course. For intellectual development, students in the first-year seminar scored significantly higher than students participating in the less rigorous orientation course. Regarding students' expectations and engagement, five questions out of 14 on the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) revealed a statistically significant association between students' expectations or outcomes and whether they had taken a first-year seminar. These questions revolved around the following themes: expectation of coursework, expectations for obtaining academic help, relationship with faculty, attending campus events and activities, and attending creative art events or venues. The authors indicated their surprise that retention was not a factor and mentioned that a variety of variables factored into student success. Therefore, future research needs to investigate a broad scope of variables to assess the success of seminars in a first-year student's college development.

In a different approach, Stebleton, Jensen, and Peter (2010) discussed how three faculty members from different disciplines at the University of Minnesota-Twin Cities, located in Minneapolis-St. Paul, Minnesota, integrated several educationally purposeful activities that promoted engagement in a first-year experience course. All entering students enrolled in a four-credit, first-year experience course. The course is taught by 18 faculty members with six sections of 75-80 students. The format included two components: 1) a weekly large group meeting with the entire class and three instructors and 2) a weekly small group meeting with one instructor. The instructors wanted to make the course as engaging as possible and asked their

students for help. At regular intervals, students in all sections provided feedback about the progress of the course in the form of a qualitative critical-incident questionnaire. These open-ended online journal prompts (2-4 questions) were administered 3-5 times over the semester, usually at key transition points in the semester. This feedback was important because it allowed the instructors to tailor the course based on the students' feedback. For example, students indicated they felt more engaged during the small group discussions, as opposed to the large group discussions; therefore, the pedagogy of the class was altered to fit the students' needs. The instructors stated that qualitative feedback to improve the course has been successful; yet, the authors indicated more of this research needs to be conducted because this first-year experience program is a work in progress.

Student Retention

Student retention is considered a high priority for institutions across the country and, therefore, is a desired outcome of any first-year experience program. Schnell and Doetkott (2003) researched a first-year experience program at a medium-sized Midwestern university and analyzed comparisons between those who took the program and those who did not through chi-square analysis. Students enrolled in a first-year seminar were paired with a matched comparison group, and retention of the 1,853 students in the two groups was compared over a period of four years. Results from their study indicated retention rates were significantly greater ($p < .001$) for students in the program group when compared with those not enrolled in the program. This was evident with a one-year retention rate of 96% for students who enrolled in a first-year experience program, compared with 91% in the matched comparison group, followed by two-year retention of 75%, compared with 63%; three-year retention of 59%, compared with 51%; and four-year retention of 51%, compared with 44%. There is probably validity in the

comparison groups because the retention rate is higher for those who enrolled in the program than those who did not for the entire duration of their college career. Further research, however, should look at the nontraditional student population and populations at greater academic risk. It would be valuable to determine whether these populations are impacted equally by such a program.

In another study on retention, Keup (2006) researched first-year experience programs by surveying students at multiple four-year institutions. Her goal was to determine if first-year experience programs, service learning, and learning communities improved first-to-second-year retention rates. Results from her survey indicated all three curricular interventions facilitated good academic practices both inside and outside the classroom, as measured by class attendance, speaking up in class, and time spent studying. Moreover, the study indicated these variables seem to promote academic collaboration among students. According to the study, these findings provide support for a more comprehensive approach to first-year curricular programming.

According to the literature, the goal of any first-year experience program is to increase retention; although, it is also important to know what factors impact retention. Willcoxson, Cotter, and Joy (2011) conducted a study to investigate attrition after the first year at six public universities in Australia using 5,211 participants. Data were collected from students using a seven-point Likert scale to respond to 70 items. Results from the study indicated students' areas of concern revolved around commitment to courses, expectations of teaching and learning, academic confidence, time management, and social engagement. The strongest correlations from the study demonstrated that the approachability of professors and their ability to make the courses interesting and challenging were very high indicators that students would return for their sophomore year. The authors also found that students' confidence level was a factor relating to

retention; if students were not confident in their academic ability or unsure what was expected from them academically, it could lead to attrition. The authors mention that longitudinal tracking of individuals using qualitative methods could provide more insight into why students decide to leave their particular institution.

Morrow and Ackerman (2012) investigated the importance of motivation and sense of belonging, as they relate to retention. The authors sought to find out if increased levels of peer support, faculty support, classroom comfort, intrinsic value, instrumental value, and personal development would be related to self-reported intention to persist into the student's second year of study. The authors conducted a study at a Ph.D.-granting institution with 156 students. Each student had to take a previously developed 26-item Sense of Belonging Scale (SBS), which measured their sense of belonging in the classroom; a previously developed 29-item Academic Attitudes Scale (AAS), which measured their motivations for attending a university and their general attitude toward university education; and one self-reported question that asked the likelihood of the student attending the institution the following year, again using a Likert scale. To calculate the results, the authors performed a multiple regression and found that high levels of faculty support, peer support, personal development, and motivation meant students were more inclined to return their sophomore year. The authors suggested all of these factors can be complex, and further research is needed to better understand the best predictors of retention, as well as what interventions and modifications are most successful in retaining students.

Madgett and Belanger (2008) wanted to identify variables that are likely to help various stakeholders manage their first-year experience. The process was completed through a quantitative analysis of a dataset (4,229 full-time university students ages 18-20) that was composed of a number of variables chosen through Tinto's (1993) theory of student departure.

Their model chose to assess the significance of variables dealing with finances and persistence; measure the social system and habits; evaluate the effects of the academic system and cognitive habits; and determine if there is a significant retention rate difference among the institutional categories relating to size, program offerings, and institutional complexity. The dependent variable was student retention. For finances and persistence, results from the study indicated credit facility and bank loans caused students to have to work additional hours to support themselves, which caused attrition. For social system and habits, results indicated a sense of belonging and confidence assisted in retention; if students felt they had made the right decision in attending a particular institution, then they were much more likely to stay. For cognitive skills and academic systems, results indicated the effects of student study habits with reference to study skills, learning skills, commitment, and time management were important factors in increasing academic integration. For university categories, results indicated mid-size universities were better at retaining students.

Examining the effects a first-year experience can have on first-generation college students is another important aspect to investigate. Woosley and Shepler (2011) conducted multiple regressions on a sample of 2,744 first-year students entering a large, public, residential Midwestern institution to examine the predictors of social integration, academic integration, institutional satisfaction, and homesick-related distress using Tinto's (1993) longitudinal attrition model as a framework. Specifically, the authors wanted to investigate if the variables Tinto identified adequately described first-generation student integration and if they predicted first-generation student integration. They also wanted to determine which variables were the most valuable in predicting integration. To operationalize Tinto's model, four criterion variables were

identified: 1) social integration, 2) academic integration, 3) institutional satisfaction, and 4) homesick-related distress (Woosley & Shepler, 2011, p. 706).

Results from the study mentioned that correlations among the predictor variables and criterion variables for the sample, when significant, were small to moderate. A series of four multiple regressions were conducted to investigate whether the inclusion of identified variables increased the power of models predicting: 1) social integration, 2) academic integration, 3) institutional satisfaction, and 4) homesick-related distress. Results indicated expected involvement and campus environment are important variables in explaining social integration. Results showed commitment, campus environment, and basic academic behaviors are key factors to understanding academic integration. Results demonstrated expected involvement, commitment, and campus environment were important in explaining the variance in institutional satisfaction. Results revealed gender, admissions test scores, and campus environment were important in understanding homesickness-related stress. To quote the study, “Students’ perceptions of the campus environment were especially important in explaining a first-generation student’s ability to adjust to university life in a variety of ways” (e.g., socially, academically, and emotionally) (p. 771). The results of the research indicate using first-year students’ perceptions would be beneficial in creating programs that are critically important to meeting their needs.

While many of the studies have used quantitative methods, there have been a few important studies that have used qualitative methods. Jessup-Anger (2011) used qualitative methods to explore how students enrolled in a one-credit, pass/fail first-year seminar at a large, research-extensive university in the Midwest were motivated to learn throughout the course. The author wanted to examine how the classroom setting and environment might influence the way students make meaning of their experience at college. The author observed a first-year seminar

several times throughout the 10-week class. As a follow-up, the author conducted one-on-one, semi-structured interviews with four of the nine students in the class to ascertain their experiences in the class and their perceptions regarding whether these experiences affected their overall college experience. Data analysis was initiated by reading all transcripts, observation notes, and course documents and combing the data for emergent patterns in the codes. The author went to great depths and found that the following themes emerged: Students' personal connection to the subject matter enhanced their motivation to learn, and pedagogical strategies served to deepen their motivation to learn (p. 106). The research revealed participants were less motivated going into the course knowing it was only one-credit and pass/fail. The study also found that the professor is an integral part of the course; if the professor could facilitate a personal connection to the material, it enhanced the students' motivation to learn. In the discussion section of the study, the author states:

With first-year seminars being a primary intervention tool for students' retention to their second year, it is important to weigh the benefits of providing a more demanding seminar that may lead to greater motivational gains for students in the long run, with the drawback of depleted resources and potentially fewer students enrolled; administrators and instructors should consider the instructional, motivational, and developmental strategies necessary to foster motivation in first-year seminars and be sure that instructors either possess them or can learn them through training or an orientation (pp. 113-114).

Jesseup-Anger (2005) mentions that future research needs to look at how students can become more engaged and motivated in a first-year seminar and that additional longitudinal research is needed to understand how students develop through a seminar.

Grade Point Average

Another important area to look at is the affect a first-year experience program has on students' grade point averages, or GPA. Pan, Guo, Alikonis, and Bai (2008) completed research at a Midwestern university and used multilevel longitudinal modeling to explore the effectiveness of intervention success programs (advising programs, academic help programs, and first-year experience programs) on students' retention and academic achievement as measured by college cumulative GPA. The findings of the study imply: 1) early-intervention programs help retain first-year college students; 2) academic-help programs prompt participants to return; 3) for those who are better prepared for college, social interactions with faculty, staff, and peers enhance their retention; 4) social integration programs increase GPA for students; and 5) general orientation helps students increase GPA at an early stage, but the effect did not necessarily last. Students in these programs received a lot of in-depth experience. For instance, the advising program incorporated a career navigation series that allowed students to explore majors interesting to them. The first-year experience program had an orientation to learning, which featured a librarian who exclusively handled concerns related to the first-year experience. The social integration program allowed students to take classes together and form peer groups. The results of this study show general orientation is necessary at the beginning of a student's college life. School administrators may also need to focus more on specific programs related to social and academic help, rather than just general orientation to help students return to school and increase GPA. Focusing on all of these areas could affect budgetary constraints; therefore, resources may need to be reallocated with existing student affairs budgets. The study suggests that for better-prepared college students, universities may need programs that promote their social interactions with faculty, staff, and peers to help with retention efforts. For the

underprepared students, academic help is needed more, and a combination of academic help and social interaction may work better.

In another study regarding GPA, Clark and Cundiff (2009) conducted research to evaluate the effectiveness of a first-year experience course at a moderate-sized, Midwestern university to evaluate the effects a first-year experience course had on second-year retention and GPA. Propensity scores were used to adjust for selection bias; the authors wanted to investigate how well these propensity score adjustment methods would limit bias that affects the treatment effects of first-year experience programs. The study's participants were 435 first-year undergraduate college students who had agreed to grant the authors access to their academic records. Each participant was given a plethora of surveys to determine a variety of traits, such as academic motivation, loneliness, depression, institutional commitment, intrinsic motivation, and commitment to completing the degree. The study's authors stated, "After stratifying on propensity scores using a logistic regression, there was no difference between groups in their retention rates even after accounting for GPA as an additional covariate, nor did GPA moderate the relationship between program participation and retention" (p. 63). However, they continued, "First-year GPA was a significant predictor of retention: those with higher GPAs were more likely to enroll for a second year in college than those with low GPAs" (p. 630). The authors were disappointed that the students who completed the course had higher GPAs than those who did not take the course and that the course had no impact on retention rates. Only when the authors matched students on propensity scores and included GPA as a covariate did they find increased retention rates for those in the program. The study hinted that future qualitative research would be helpful to pinpoint which aspects of the course were most effective and which ones were least effective.

Jamelske (2009) conducted research measuring the impact of a university first-year experience program on student GPA and retention at a medium-size Midwestern public university using a first-year cohort from 2006. The results of his study indicated the average student enrolled in a first-year experience program was 6.4% more likely to return after one year than if he or she was not enrolled in such a program. An average student not enrolled in a first-year experience program and living off campus was only 70.3% likely to return. If this student lived on campus, the likelihood of retention would have increased by 12%. If this student had also taken the first-year experience program, the likelihood of retention would have increased by an additional 6%. These results suggest that taking a first-year experience program adds value to the student experience and that living on campus has a strong positive effect on retention. The author admitted, however, that some multicollinearity issues might exist, which could affect the validity of the study.

Results from the study also indicated the first-year experience program had a positive influence on student academic performance after one year, as measured by a .101-.122 increase in cumulative GPA. The estimated boost to GPA attributable to participating in the first-year experience program was much smaller than the positive effect of living on campus. However, as with the case of retention, it appears taking a first-year experience program at this particular university improves academic performance, and living on campus has an additional positive influence. The author also states that given the strong positive influence of living on campus, institutions may consider investing in activities that link the first-year experience program to on-campus residence hall life to explore if such activities further student outcomes.

Noble, Flynn, Lee, and Hilton (2008) researched a more academically focused program implemented in fall 1998 at the University of South Alabama titled ESSENCE (Entering

Students at South Engaging in New College Experiences). ESSENCE has seven components, including a residential component, an orientation component, structured group activities, relationship-building activities, peer advising, and tutoring. The goal of this specific program was to increase both the grade point averages and the return rate of each entering class. Topics in this course included exam preparation, test taking, study skills, academic and career advising, discovering personal values, and writing effectively. The classes are taught by housing staff and administrative personnel. The study examined first-year students' achievement on three dependent variables: first-year grade point average (GPA), four-year graduation rate, and five-year graduation rate. Results of the study indicated ESSENCE program participants have GPAs that are 0.15 points higher than their non-ESSENCE, on-campus counterparts. Much of the ESSENCE effect is in the first year GPA, which, in turn, increases the odds of graduating in four or five years. According to the study, the findings suggest an effect of ESSENCE is speeding up graduation and increasing the likelihood of graduating in four years. The students in this program are 50% to 60% more likely than other students to obtain their degrees in four years, even when controlling for ACT score and GPA. The study also suggested implementing the ESSENCE program for a longer duration than the first year might improve retention to an even greater extent. However, there is no empirical evidence to support that statement. Another issue with this study is students were able to self-select into the ESSENCE program, which could have an effect on the findings.

Woosley and Miller (2009) used regression models at a public, largely residential Midwestern institution to determine if early college experiences (academic integration, social integration, and institutional commitment) measured during the third week of the first semester could predict retention to the following year, as well as academic performance (GPA) one

semester and two semesters out. Results from the study suggest retention and academic performance can be predicted by the early transition experiences of academic integration, social integration, and institutional commitment, even when gender, ethnicity, and entrance exam scores are included in the analysis. The study also indicated assessments of the transition experience taken during the third week of the semester could significantly predict academic outcomes for months, or even a year, in the future. According to the study, in addition to knowing which students are at risk based on their demographic and background variables, university professionals can also use information concerning the students' early transition experiences to flag potentially at-risk students and begin interventions. A drawback to this study is that pre-college measures of academic or social integration are unknown for the students in this study.

Peer Mentoring. Peer mentoring is also a facet of first-year experience programs that institutions are starting to employ. Rode (2002) reports that the use of peer mentors on college campuses has been recognized as an effective strategy for helping new students achieve academic and personal success. Astin (1965) indicated the peer group is the single most potent source of influence on development during the undergraduate years. Astin cites a number of advantages in incorporating peer mentors, including that it is a very cost-effective way to deliver a first-year experience program. Rodes (2002) agrees and states, "There seems to be a lot of plusses by incorporating peer mentors, due to the fact that new students learn a lot of information because they can look to the mentor as a role model, having been through the program before" (p. 43).

Corella (2010) researched peer mentoring at a large, public university in the Southwest. Her research focused on interviewing students in a first-year experience program who were

assigned peer mentors. Results from her study indicated the outcome of a student having a peer mentor varied. According to the participants, if the peer mentor took a genuine interest in them, took the time to get to know them, and supported them in their studies, they then performed better. If the relationship was negative, the participant did not benefit as a result of being assigned a peer mentor. The study summarized that implementing a training program for potential peer mentors would ensure a more consistent mentoring environment for the participants that would subsequently improve the first-year experience program. Further qualitative research should focus on improving engagement between mentors and peer mentors.

Power, Miles, Peruzzi, and Voerman (2011) created a guide to developing and implementing a peer-to-peer academic mentoring program for first-year students at Macquarie University in New South Wales, Australia. The program focused on transition assistance, academic support and resources, networking, individual mentoring, and developing academic skills while building social networks. The authors deemed their program a success because their student mentors can bring about “immense positive change in individuals who have failed to respond to other forms of intervention, and confirms the many favorable benefits long-thought to be associated with mentorship, including positive effects on student behavior, health, interpersonal relations, attitude and motivation” (p. 76). One problem with this study is that while the authors state the program is a success, they provide no supporting data.

In a similar program, Peck (2011) highlights the success Stephen F. Austin State University had incorporating peer involvement advisers to improve first-year student engagement and retention. At the university, university administrators train peer advisers. According to Peck, the program conducted more than 100 peer-involvement advising sessions, and among the first-year students who voluntarily participated, the retention rate for fall to spring

was 95%, compared with 89% before the program was established. Eighty-six percent of all students who had a peer-involvement advising session were able to connect with a student organization, and about 72% were still involved the following semester. Ninety-one percent of participants said the advising process made them feel more connected to the university; 82% said it made them more likely to seek leadership roles; 92% said it made them more aware of what they were learning from their cocurricular experiences; and 88% said the program helped them balance their schoolwork, social life, and cocurricular experiences (p. 24). The author suggests more higher education institutions should adopt a peer-advising concept into their first-year experience program because students at this particular institution were more responsive when receiving information from their peers. However, it is important to keep in mind this research was only conducted at one particular institution, and this kind of program may not be transferable to other institutions; therefore, additional research would be beneficial. Another flaw of the study was that it involved voluntary participation, which could skew validity results.

Student perceptions. While many studies have focused on the effectiveness of first-year experience programs, surprisingly, there have been fewer studies that focus on student perceptions of these programs. Schrader and Brown (2008) researched perceptions of a first-year experience program at a large Northeastern university in 2002. Approximately 65% of incoming freshmen voluntarily enrolled in the first-year experience program, and 35% chose not to participate in the program. A total of 670 students who were enrolled in the program were chosen for the study, in addition to 234 who were not enrolled in the program. A battery of self-report scales measured the participants' knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors as they pertained to academic and life skills. The study found the first-year program group rated their knowledge of resources significantly higher than the students not enrolled in the program. Those in the

program also maintained a somewhat-consistent rating pertaining to their attitude toward interactions, while the control group declined. There were several concerns presented in this study. First, the differential rates of selection in this study could cause concern for validity. Secondly, the study mentioned the effects of these findings were small, and the data from the study did not demonstrate robust positive effects for the first year. Lastly, the self-selection of participants could also be problematic because the participants' positive or negative experience in the program could bias the data. The study mentioned that future investigation should focus on the difference between male/female responses; in most cases, females rated their schools more highly than their male counterparts. In addition, males tended to opt out of the course more often than females.

Choate and Smith (2003) took a different approach and researched the impact first-year experience programs had on a wellness model that was implemented at a small private institution in the Southeast. This institution incorporated this specific wellness model for fall 1998 and spring 1999 for its first-year experience program. The wellness model focused on five life tasks: 1) spirituality; 2) self-direction; 3) work, recreation, and leisure; 4) friendship; and 5) love. Results from the study taken from student perceptions indicated the wellness model enhanced student learning through increasing self-awareness, self-direction, recognition of the interrelatedness of all life areas, the identification of strengths and areas for improvement, and appreciation of strategies for change. Further research indicated the need to sample a larger and more diverse group of students because the study sample only included 59 students, which could limit the scope of the findings.

Wilcox, Winn, and Fyvie-Gauld (2005) examined the experiences of a group of first-year students to grasp their social development over a period of time. The authors wanted to

“investigate the processes through which social integration influenced students’ decisions to stay at the university or withdraw, their aims being to identify factors that lead to withdrawal and to explore ways in which the student experience can be enhanced” (p. 709). This study used a twofold qualitative approach; the study examined a sample of 22 students who completed their first year and 12 students who withdrew. For the methodology, a broad sample of students was chosen who represented the student population. Qualitative interviews lasting approximately one hour were conducted, tape-recorded, and transcribed. The questions revolved around Induction Week, learning and teaching experiences, student support and guidance, personal thoughts about leaving at any time, and the process of leaving. According to the author, the findings from the interviews show a plethora of influences regarding retention. Regarding withdrawal, the authors found that the decision to leave was mainly due to social support and academic and material factors. For social support, the authors found students who were unable to make friends struggled or reported feeling homesick. The authors summarized that a combination of students making friends early in their freshman year and relying on home support were critical for their retention. For academic and material factors, the authors found that social support from the faculty was critical. Students wanted to interact with staff and faculty members who were approachable, supportive, and demonstrated they cared about teaching. These findings further augment the importance of Tinto’s theory of student departure (discussed in the next section), which explains that when students’ experiences conflict either academically or socially, this could lead to attrition. Overall, Wilcox et al. (2005) found, “The importance for students’ integration into the university of making compatible friends, and they illustrate some of the processes by which social and academic integration is achieved” (p. 718). Regarding limitations, the authors pointed out theirs was just one study at a particular institution, and additional

research is needed “on students’ social integration to contribute to a deeper theorizing of social integration and social support in the university context” (p. 720).

Brent (2005) studied whether academically oriented first-year experience programs could be beneficial to students at the University of Calgary. The study discussed how the academic seminar could develop research skills that would help students excel through the duration of their college career. Results from the mixed-methods study indicated that, in general, students reported they liked the program, small class size, and interaction with the faculty members. The students also felt more confident with their reading/writing skills and developed more positive relationships with faculty members. Moreover, the study stated students felt more confident in their ability to function effectively at the university. It should be noted, however, the author did not specify how he chose to interview the 19 out of the 100 students in the program, which would have been helpful information to know.

Brinkworth, McCann, Matthews, and Nordström (2008) conducted a broad survey study of first-year expectations and experiences of teaching and learning from the perspective of students and teachers at the University of Adelaide, Australia, six months into their first year and again during their second year. Unique to this study was that professors were surveyed to gain access into their perceptions of their students’ first-year experiences. Results from the study indicated many students felt they were not supported enough by their teachers/staff and were expecting more feedback on assignments, as well as increased support during their first year in college. Students also felt working with other students and learning from enthusiastic teachers and staff was beneficial. Not surprisingly, the students who were the most highly motivated regarding their program of study were more frequently retained. An interesting result in the study indicated that while professors felt outside commitments would hinder student

performance, students felt outside commitments would not affect their academic performance. Future researchers may want to investigate if students just perceive this to be the case or if, in fact, outside commitments have no bearing on academic performance. Another alluring result in the survey indicated a discrepancy regarding feedback on assignments and papers. Students indicated they did not receive enough feedback to further enhance their learning, whereas professors felt they gave enough feedback. These results indicate a discrepancy that calls for further investigation. Overall, this study reveals students need peer support, self-motivation, and teacher feedback/support to help them develop and achieve greater success in college. Further research regarding student and teacher perceptions may help researchers and educators discover discrepancies in perceptions between students and faculty.

Meyer, Spencer, and French (2009) interviewed 52 college freshmen at a small liberal arts university in 2006. According to their study, almost all of the first-year students who were interviewed approached their first semester with the perception that the academic workload and classes were going to be challenging. Yet, after experiencing their first-semester courses, the perceptions about college academics were mixed. It seems that through Meyer et al.'s study, many students were feeling their college experience would be more challenging than their expectations. While their study did not specifically discuss first-year experience programs, it does demonstrate that further qualitative research is needed to focus more on how students make meaning of their first-year experience. Responses could be used to alter first-year experience programs.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the literature has shown first-year experience programs are a critical component in higher education, and, if implemented well, they can acclimate a student better to college life, subsequently improving retention and increasing a student's sense of belonging with the institution. These first-year experience programs connect students to valuable resources, the institution, peer groups, and the faculty. Some programs are more social, while others are more academic in nature; yet, they all share the same goal: to ease the transition from high school to college life. Administrators need to evaluate their institutions' first-year experience programs often to ensure they are meeting their institutions' standards and to ensure students are getting the most out of these programs. Most of the literature has focused on how a first-year experience program affects retention. There needs to be a heightened focus regarding students' perceptions of a first-year experience program; student perceptions and perspectives are critically important to the maintenance and success of any first-year experience program. Students are the clients at colleges and universities, and faculty and staff need to provide services that support them both socially and academically in the college environment, and they must constantly evaluate their programs to ensure they are serving students to the best of their ability.

No matter how well-planned, research-based, and proactively conceived a first-year experience program may be, programs can be catapulted toward institutionalization or totally destroyed by student reactions and perceptions. For any elective course, especially a first-year experience program, it is crucial that students perceive a value in successfully completing it. Otherwise, enrollments decline, and the program wanes or outright fails. It behooves any freshman seminar director to constantly keep a finger on the pulse of current and potential students and continually check their perceptions, as well as those of former freshman seminar

students (Fidler, 1989).

Chapter III

Methodology

Theoretical Framework

The primary framework for this study was Sanford's (1966) theory of challenge and support, which explains students need a proper balance between challenge and support to develop. Students must be challenged to prevent academic boredom, but they also must feel properly supported through those challenges. This is an important theory to recognize when developing a first-year experience program because it demonstrates the program needs to have a proper balance of compelling students to develop good study and social habits during their first year of college, as well as offering structured support. This evenness allows students to feel comfortable and welcomed at their institution (Willcoxson, Cotter, & Joy, 2011; Morrow & Ackerman, 2012). Therefore, participants in this study were asked how this type of program should incorporate challenge and support.

The subsidiary framework for this study was based on Chickering and Reisser's (1993) three "admonitions," or essentials, to increase positive development in the college learning environment: 1) integration of work and learning, 2) recognition and respect for individual differences, and 3) acknowledgement of the cyclical nature of learning and development. The first admonition, integration of work and learning, emphasizes the importance of incorporating work opportunities so students learn what it is like to have an internship/job during college. The second admonition, recognition and respect for individual differences, mentions colleges should create a culture that is both accepting and conducive to students of different backgrounds learning from one another. The third admonition, acknowledgement of the cyclical nature of

learning and development, stresses that colleges need to provide challenges to help students grow both personally and professionally.

Sanford's theory of challenge and support led me to ask participants what they need in a first-year experience program to feel properly challenged and to find the program interesting, yet properly supported, so they do not disengage from the program. Based on Chickering and Reisser's three admonitions, participants were asked what is needed in a first-year experience program to create a learning environment that promotes a positive atmosphere for students.

Selection of the Research Site

The Fashion Institute of Technology, generally known as FIT, is a State University of New York (SUNY) college of art, business, design, and technology connected to the fashion industry, with a metropolitan campus located in Manhattan. It was founded in 1944 and accredited in 1957. It has an enrollment of more than 10,000 students, of which 2,300 live on campus in four residence halls (Fashion Institute of Technology, 2013). The student demographics are as follows:

Table 1

Fashion Institute of Technology Student Demographics

Race/Ethnicity (percent of known race)		
American Indian or Alaskan	10	0.12 %
Asian	1,009	11.9 %
Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander	39	0.46 %
Black	869	10.25 %
White	4,700	55.45 %
Hispanic	1,533	18.09 %
Multi-Racial	316	3.73 %
Total Reported	8,476	84.3 %
Non-Resident Aliens	1,294	12.87 %
Unknown	282	2.81 %
Total	10,052	
Gender		
Male	1,559	16 %
Female	8,493	84 %
Total	10,052	

FIT has a five-day orientation program that welcomes new and transfer students to the community and the campus. The program has various social activities during the first two days of the week; students from various majors are assigned to a student group so they can get to know a mix of other new FIT students. The social activities these days are led by student ambassadors who FIT's Student Life Department has trained to help acclimate new students to the college. The following two days are dedicated to academic advising and departmental meetings. On the fifth, and final day, students can choose to attend a selection of workshops and off-campus trips. At the end of orientation, all students participate in a common project. In this project, each orientation group creates a presentation showcasing the experiences of its members' first week on campus. To get to know the school better, the students must collect certain items for their presentation, along with pictures of their experiences, feelings, new friends, impressions, and anything that helps to commemorate their orientation week. Each group has two minutes to present, and they are judged on creativity, originality, and best presentation.

Almost every college provides some type of orientation for its new and transfer students. Over the past few years, FIT has made strides to improve the student experience. In 2006, the institute added a fourth residence hall to accommodate the growing number of students on campus. In fall 2012, FIT created an academic advising department that assigns each student a full-time, professional academic adviser who has extensive knowledge of FIT's programs, policies and procedures, and academic deadlines. The advisers work with students to address issues that relate to academic progress at FIT.

Unlike its rival, Parsons School of Art and Design, which provides a uniform study curriculum for all its first-year students, FIT provides no seminar course for students to develop

socially and academically, no dedicated first-year experience center to continue to provide development/support to students throughout the year, and no living and learning communities for first-year students on campus.

Because FIT has not defined what it wants in a first-year experience program, this exploratory study provides insight into what students would find beneficial in a first-year experience program, e.g. types of services, components, and programs that could lead to an increased sense of belonging to the institution and improved campus environment for students.

Method

This qualitative study was guided by Sanford's theory of challenge and support as a primary framework and Chickering and Reisser's three admonitions as a subsidiary framework. Sanford's theory of challenge and support was the basis for asking study participants what they need in a first-year experience program to feel properly challenged and to find the program interesting, yet properly supported, so they do not disengage from the program. Chickering and Reisser's three admonitions guided me to ask participants what is needed in a first-year experience program to create a learning environment that promotes a positive atmosphere for students.

By using content thematic analysis as a design method, this study sought to understand students' perceptions of their first-year experience in relation to support they receive from FIT. This type of design produced a rich and detailed summarization because first-, second-, and third-year students have completed at least one semester and were able to have the ability to reflect on what could have made their first-year experience better.

Selection of Study Participants

The first step in the research process was acting on the permission already secured from the director of residential life to send out an email to first-, second-, and third-year students who live on campus and are enrolled at the institution. The subject of the email stated students would receive a \$15 gift card for participation in the study. First-, second-, and third-year students (including transfer students) were selected if they had completed at least one semester at the Fashion Institute of Technology because they would have the most insight regarding how a first-year experience program could have better improved their first year as a student. Fourth-year students were omitted because many are likely close to completing their studies and may be focused on graduation.

The email recipients received introduced the nature of the project and asked if they were interested in participating in a qualitative study to determine students' perceptions of their first-year experience in relation to the support they receive from FIT. If interested, a follow-up email was sent asking for background information of the individual (gender, name, age, major at FIT, and length of time at FIT). Each background profile was reviewed to ensure the sample contained first-, second-, and third-year students. I then used stratified random sampling by separating participants into two groups by gender/rank year and then randomly selected 30 participants, who then were broken down into 10 participants from year one, year two, and year three (approximately 90% female and 10% male to mirror the demographics of FIT).

Data Collection

The data needed for this study came from interviews with 30 students. The interviews took place at times and locations that were convenient for the students and lasted approximately 30-60 minutes. All participants selected for the study signed a consent form indicating their

understanding of the study and their agreement to participate. They also received a \$15 gift card for their participation in the study.

The following questions were asked in each semi-structured interview session: 1) What types of academic support are available for first-year students at FIT? 2) What types of social support are available for first-year students at FIT? 3) What types of financial support are available for first-year students at FIT? 4) What are your perceptions regarding the creation of a first-year experience program at FIT? 5) What components would you like to see included in a first-year experience program at FIT? 6) How should this program address student development skills and issues at FIT? 7) What are some of the particular challenges that FIT students face in their first year, and how could a first-year experience program lessen these challenges? 8) If you were a first-year student, what would you need in this type of program to feel both challenged and supported? 9) What is needed to ensure this type of program can cater to a diverse student pool (ethnic/SES) and with different learning needs and expectations? 10) What impact do you feel this program could have on retention? 11) What type of outcomes do you think this program will have for the campus and for its students?

Data Analysis

The guiding research method for this study was thematic analysis, which emphasizes pinpointing, examining, and recording patterns (or “themes”) within data. Themes are patterns across datasets that are associated with a specific research question and are important for describing a phenomenon. The themes become the categories for analysis. Thematic analysis is performed by conducting these six phases of coding to create established, meaningful patterns: familiarization with data, generating initial codes, searching for themes among codes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the final report (Braun & Clark 2006; Daly,

Kellehear, & Gliksman 1997; Fereday & Muir-Cochrane 2006). Data were collected by interviewing and audio-recording each student in the study and then transcribing each interview verbatim and coding all responses.

The first step of this study, transcription and analysis, began within 72 hours of each of the 30 interviews. The second step was to search for codes and themes within the data, and the third step was to compose a memo to reflect on the themes and codes that were revealed from the interviews. The fourth step was combing through the data again to see if any of the themes and codes should be adjusted based on the reflections in the memo. The collection and analysis of data provided insight about the types of social, academic, and financial support students need to have a better experience and sense of belonging at the Fashion Institute of Technology.

Presentation of Results

The purpose of this qualitative study was to collect data through individual interviews to learn about students' perceptions of their first-year experience in relation to support they receive at FIT. These interviews were transcribed and coded to reveal concepts and ideas. Repeating concepts relevant to the research questions subsequently were organized and grouped into common themes. Common themes were then integrated to reveal a core theme that could be linked to the results of this study. The data are presented, in part, as narrative passages that also incorporate a detailed discussion of themes, perspectives from participants, quotations from participants, and a discussion of possible interconnected themes to convey the findings of this analysis.

Methods of Achieving and Assuring Trustworthiness

I did not interview any student with whom I had interacted, had to adjudicate, or directly supervised. These precautions were taken to mitigate any biases I may have toward the

participants, as well as to foster their willingness to share their thoughts and perceptions during the interview process. It is important to establish as much of a rapport with the participants as possible to ensure open and candid responses to the research questions. I also actively noted my own perspectives and reflections in a separate section of the field notes to ensure differentiation between my thoughts and the perspectives and reflections of the participants.

Researcher Subjectivity and Reflexivity

The first-year experience has always been an important topic to me because my career started in residential life and has continued in this vein. Therefore, I have a passion for how a campus environment can affect students. A first-year experience program has the power to improve students' experience by assisting them with social, academic, and financial support, as well as by connecting them to various resources at the institution.

When starting to write the proposal for this study, I was much more focused on retention at FIT, my home institution for the past eight years. After much reflection and further research, I noticed that while FIT has a good retention rate, students have stated through the Student Opinions Survey that they do not feel a sense of belonging to the institution and have had poor interactions with non-faculty, including FIT's student affairs division and other administrative staff. I also heard from personal exchanges that many students do not feel welcomed on campus, that no one is helpful, and that they feel lost in the campus community. This study will provide insight into why students feel this lack of belonging at FIT.

Chapter IV

Findings

This chapter will cover the findings of this study, which used content thematic analysis to pull themes from the data that were collected. The main focus was to ascertain students' perceptions of their first-year experience in relation to support they receive from FIT. In my codebook, this focus was defined as an experience of personal involvement in which people felt themselves to be an integral part of a system or environment. For a segment to qualify as a theme, there had to be the mention of personal involvement in a system or environment, e.g. first year of college atmosphere, orientation, sense of belonging. For a segment to be excluded from a theme, there was no mention of personal involvement in a system or environment, e.g. college atmosphere, orientation, sense of belonging. The themes in the data are interpersonal relationships, campus environment, communicative support, and opportunities. Each of these themes will be discussed in depth and will use a narrative passage to explain how they affect students' perceptions of their first-year experience in relation to support they receive from the Fashion Institute of Technology.

As previously mentioned in Chapter III, an email was sent out to 2,300 students who lived on FIT's campus, inviting them to participate in an interview regarding their perceptions of their first-year experience in relation to support they received from FIT. Of these, 60 students expressed interest. After reviewing the participants to ensure I had not interacted with the students in the past, 30 participants were interviewed. Of these 30 participants, 10 were first-year (nine female/one male); 10 were second-year (nine female/one male); and 10 were third-year (nine female/one male). It should also be noted that the first-year, second-year, and third-

year samples contained participants from different majors and different ethnic backgrounds (Appendix D). All students were assigned a pseudonym to protect their identity.

Interpersonal Relationships (First-Year Participants)

Interpersonal relationships were a prominent theme that emerged from the data analysis. In this section, the relationships between students and faculty will be discussed first, followed by relationships with students and staff, and, lastly, relationships between students. This section will examine and demonstrate how these relationships affect a sense of belonging at the college.

Relationships with faculty were the most positive when comparing all other relationships. Results from the data indicated five first-year participants had positive interactions with faculty, whereas four first-year participants had mixed interactions with faculty (one person did not comment on interactions with faculty). Nick, a first-year illustration major, came to the Fashion Institute of Technology because of the reputation of the faculty.

In my major alone, a lot of professors are really approachable. Of course, some professors will be straightforward with you. They're not going to be joking around. If they have to tell you something that you wouldn't want to hear, they have to tell you. To me, I think what will help students the most is when professors don't lie to them, and they actually tell you what happens in the real world right now. ... I appreciate it more when a professor goes out of the way and stops teaching the lesson and tells students what's going on. They show their projects, their processes, their work, and what they get out of it. I think that's the one that helps students the most. It motivates them because eventually you're going to want to duplicate yourself to your professors. You see results, and that's what you're here for. You want to have those results in the end somewhere along the line.

Susan, a first-year fashion merchandising management major, mentioned professors are available if the student makes the effort to reach out to them.

If I need help on something, I email them. They all give us their office hours, but I usually don't have the time to go to them because I have other things to do, so I prefer email. ... Some of the teachers are, for me, easier to connect with because I have things with them in common. My fashion industry teacher last semester, I loved her. I've been trying to join her club for months, but I just never have gone to the meetings. I don't know why. But she was really nice. Besides connecting with them in class, I can't really connect outside or anything. I'll occasionally run into my advertising teacher, and I'll say 'Hi' to him for like two seconds, and that will be it. But it's not ... like a friendship-relationship sort of thing.

Tina, a first-year fashion merchandising management major, felt frustrated by some of the faculty.

Sometimes there are professors who just don't care about the students. They are like, 'Okay, you do this and that. I'm out of here.' They should be the ones who should be providing the information for the students; otherwise, the students are not really going to learn about them.

While there were a few complaints, most of the participants felt the faculty was respected in the industry and accommodating in helping students with their growth and development.

First-year participants displayed mixed interactions with staff. Six participants indicated positive interactions; three indicated mixed interactions; and one indicated poor interactions. First-year participants found some departments more helpful than others. Participants spoke highly of the Residential Life Department, Health Services Department, Writing Studio, and

Tutoring Center. Feedback regarding the Academic Advisement Center was mixed, while the Registrar's Department was poorly received. Susan, a first-year fashion merchandising management major, praised the Writing Studio.

They're very great with helping you figure out if you don't understand what you're supposed to be writing about. You can show them what the teacher gave to you, and they'll help you. ... They'll explain it to you, and they'll elaborate on it. They'll help you write it, and they help you correct your mistakes and all of that. I really like the Writing Studio.

Susan also found the Academic Advisement Center to be helpful. She stated, "I was there the other day because I'm switching to an advertising, marketing, and communications major for bachelor's, and they really helped me figure out what I need to do for the switch."

However, Deborah, a first-year visual exhibition major, felt frustrated at times. She stated, "I remember going back two or three times before I met with [the tutor] because every time I went, she was out or something. I'd always get different answers about things."

Lucy, a first-year fashion design major, mentioned her problems regarding the Registrar's Department. She felt as if they did not care and put little effort into assisting her.

It's their job to work there, and they can't fulfill their needs. They could always say, 'I can't help you, but I know someone that can. Let me talk to my boss because they could help you.' They just seemed like they didn't know the answers, so I wasn't important.

As a freshman, I really did not like that.

Tina, a first-year fashion design major, echoed some of these sentiments about the Registrar's Department.

I once went to the registrar. I had to wait there for quite a long time, but it wasn't [the registrar's] fault; it was the person [who I worked with]. She had a lot of questions, and she had major issues. I talked to her about transferring my credit, and she was acting like, 'I don't understand your question.' She kind of looked at me just like, 'What are you talking about?'

First-year student interactions with other students were the most poorly received. One participant had positive interactions; five had mixed interactions; three had poor interactions; and one participant did not mention interactions with other students. For example, Linda, a first-year fashion merchandising management major, was the one participant who indicated having positive interactions.

I'm very friendly, so I do have friends. So when they tell me that, I feel like, 'Why?' I think many people say it because in their classes they don't really talk to people because they're listening to a lecture or working. So they always say you make your friends in the first week during orientation. If you don't go to those events, or you don't join a club, there's no other way to get to know people.

Interpersonal Relationships (Second-Year Participants)

Compared to the first-year participants, the second-year participants reported having the best interactions with faculty. Seven second-year participants reported positive interactions, and three second-year participants reported mixed interactions. Liz, a second-year home products major, succinctly stated, "[The faculty are] good. I haven't really had a bad experience." Rachel, a second-year advertising, marketing, and communications major, stated the faculty were the reason many students chose to attend the Fashion Institute of Technology.

I really do respect all of my professors, and I love the first day when you get to hear who they worked with, what they've done. I really do feel almost on more of a business level with them.

Ashley, a second-year fashion merchandising management major, stated interactions with faculty are great, as long as students are outgoing and make an effort to reach out.

I think that really depends on the type of students you are. If you're a little bit quiet and sort of introverted, then you won't want to interact with faculty; but if you're sort of loud and outgoing, then you will. I know most of my friends were very loud and talkative, so they really like speaking to faculty and finding out about them. And then, of course, it's all about networking and making connections. I think it's good, and faculty are very nice here.

On the other hand, Clark, a second-year advertising, marketing, and communications major, felt that even with the small class sizes, professors did not go out of their way to interact with him.

Even now I've never kept in touch with any of them because there was nothing there. I know we are not 800-student classes. There's only 20 of us that should be able to get to them, but they didn't go out of their way, so I'm not going to go out of my way, if you will.

The second-year participants seemed to have more mixed interactions with staff. Four second-year participants described their interactions with staff as positive, whereas five second-year participants described their interactions as mixed. One second-year participant did not give input on interactions with staff. Liz, a second-year home products major, felt the staff at the Academic Advisement Center was very friendly.

I know there's an Academic Advisement Center, which I actually visited once because I'm minoring. I had to go there, and they were very helpful. I think that students should kind of be pushed to visit there because they made me feel like I could go there anytime. They were really helpful and really nice, and it was just kind of more than I was expecting. So that was good for me to know that I had that support.

However, Candace, a second-year fashion merchandising management major, felt the staff were not very friendly.

Sometimes I feel like the people that work in some of the offices here are rude. I've been deregistered from my classes before just for missing a payment. I've tried to talk to them about it, and I feel like they're really dismissive. I don't know if this [intended first-year experience] program could help with that.

Taryn, a second-year fashion merchandising management major, also mirrored Candace's sentiments.

It's just they're really like unfriendly there, and ... they're very 'New York,' like to the point. That's fine, but I feel like starting off as a student, I kind of wanted somebody to be kind and welcoming to make me feel more comfortable asking questions instead of being kind of like shut down. ... The first person you approach there is always really rude. ... I'm over it now in my second year, but at first I was like, 'Whoa.'

Similarly to the first-year participants, there was a vast array of interactions between the students and the staff. While there were no clear delineations between departments among the second-year participants, the main sentiment was that the staff did not seem to create a welcoming environment, and they would get easily annoyed at any questions students posed.

Interactions with other students were the most mixed in response with this group. Two participants described their interactions with students as positive; five participants described their interactions with students as mixed; and one participant described peer-to-peer interactions as poor. One participant did not comment on interactions with other students. Rachel, a second-year advertising, marketing, and communications major, spoke positively about other students.

I found a group of girls that I really clicked with, and it's kind of funny because I feel like it's almost even like a little bit easier [to make friends] because everyone who comes to this school I feel like has the same state of mind. It's just like you're very driven.

You're very into the fast pace. You kind of have the same interests, too, within fashion, with anything, with things to do, with food. It's kind of like you just got to find the people that you mesh with.

Candace, a second-year fashion merchandising management major, mentioned feeling a lack of sense of community with the students.

I'm friends with a few people, and then in classes, there's some classes I'll talk to people, and there's other classes I don't talk to anyone. It's just really weird. It's just how this school is. People are very into their own thing. There's not really a sense of community. People do different things. It's not like a school where everyone comes together to do something I feel like, like other universities.

Alicia, a second-year fashion design major, shared similar feelings.

For me, I haven't really had any social support within my group of friends, maybe one or two people, but ... they wouldn't come to my mind at first. Personally, I haven't had the advantage of having a close friend that I could feel comfortable with.

Interpersonal Relationships (Third-Year Participants)

Equivalently to the second-year and first-year participant groups, the third-year participants reported having the best interactions with faculty. Five third-year participants reported positive interactions, and five third-year participants reported mixed interactions. Abigail, a third-year advertising, marketing, and communications major, enjoyed her interactions with professors. When asked about her interactions, she said:

Pretty positive. I think they are very understanding in circumstances. Since it is a smaller school, I have received a lot more personal attention than I know my friends at larger universities receive in huge lecture halls, which I think has been very beneficial.

Michelle, a third-year fabric styling major, also had positive interactions with faculty.

Good. They're mostly good. I like that the professors have been in the industry. I think that's really important. I really like that they have that [professional experience]. ...

I've gotten the same reaction from a lot of people. It's great because they have this background, but they don't have the teaching background sometimes. Sometimes some of the lesson plans and directions are a little bit confusing, I think. I've never had a professor that I was like, 'I can't go to his class.' They've all been super-nice and really understanding. It's just that sometimes things get confusing because I think they're not as aware of how we're perceiving what's happening, sort of, which gets a little weird.

Julie, a third-year international trade and marketing major, had more of a mixed response regarding her interactions with professors.

I've had a mix, and I feel like at any college you're going to get that. I've had some professors that you can tell they really want to be here, and they work in the industry, and they love what they do, and they really want to share that with you. And then I feel like

sometimes, on the other hand, the full-time professors who aren't still working in the industry necessarily, they don't involve themselves as much, and I feel like they also don't have as much to bring to the classroom

Elli, a third-year fashion merchandising management major, shared her mixed interactions with professors.

I would say pretty good for the most part. But I've had a good amount of professors who won't respond to my emails, or if they do, they'll give me one-word answers. I'm like, 'All right.' Or I had a big problem. I had a group project, and the girl in my group wasn't doing any work, and I emailed [the professor] telling him the problem, and he goes, 'Well, this is not professional for you to email me two days before the presentation is due, blah, blah, blah.' I wasn't ... I'm still going to do the presentation because I think he thought that I wasn't going to do it. But he just freaked out.

While there were some complaints regarding lack of teaching ability, the sentiments among the third-year participants – in most cases – are that the faculty are supportive, nice, and helpful. As discussed earlier, the first- and second-year participants also acknowledged these sentiments.

Interactions with staff at the Fashion Institute of Technology were mostly mixed. Two third-year participants indicated positive interactions; five participants indicated mixed interactions; and two participants indicated poor interactions. One participant did not comment on interactions with staff. Elli, a third-year fashion merchandising management major, felt that, besides the Residential Life Department, most of the staff were unaccommodating.

I think that a lot of the staff here are very rude. First of all, rude. Second of all, they say they want to help us, but really don't. And I'm not even just saying this because you're

part of this department. ... [Some of] the people here are nice. I had a problem before winter break where I was having problems finding a new roommate. I talked to some lady. She was so nice and helped me out. I literally told her, ‘Thank you so much because nobody’s ever this sweet to me and patient and helpful.’

Julia, a third-year fashion merchandising management major, also expressed mixed interactions. “I had gone to the bursar because I had gotten this charge that I wanted to dispute, and she was just wildly rude to me. And ... my roommates have had similar experiences with people.”

When probed to explain what Julia meant by “similar experiences with other people,” she shared the following sentiment:

My best friend goes to a small liberal arts school in Michigan, and it feels like anything she needs, they’re right there. They’re ready. ‘What can we do? How can we fix this for you?’ Like, ‘You’re our priority.’ I guess I would say as a student, I don’t know what FIT’s priorities are, if that’s an easier way to put it.

Michelle, a third-year fabric styling major, also complained about the staff and said they were unhelpful.

I feel sometimes I just instantly get a sense of attitude. I’m like, ‘I’m sorry.’ In financial aid sometimes, too. It’s things where you have important questions, and you feel like they don’t want to take the time to sort of do it. They have it in their minds, ‘You should just know this.’ I’m like, ‘I don’t know anything about financial aid. I need you to tell me the process.’ I know my roommate had a problem with that earlier in the year and actually met with Eric, the dean of students, because she was just like, ‘Are you kidding me?’ I don’t know exactly what happened to her, but something happened at the bursar’s

office, and she was like, ‘Why wouldn’t they talk to me?’ It was just crazy the way they had spoken to her.

Overall, it was very clear that participants have some difficulty interacting with the staff. While some departments, such as the Residential Life Department and Health Services Department, were well received. Participants mostly described other departments, such as the Bursar’s Department, Registrar’s Department, and Financial Aid Department, as unsupportive. For departments that were well received, participants pointed out that they felt welcomed and that their questions were answered efficiently. For departments that were received poorly, participants pointed out they were unable to get clear answers to their questions and felt that the staffs were rude to them, which made them avoid these offices.

In the third-year participant group, interactions with other students were mixed. Two third-year participants described their interactions with other students as positive, whereas eight third-year participants described their interactions with other students as mixed. Mia, a third-year advertising, marketing, and communications major, felt student interactions with other students were positive; however, there was a factor regarding how well one was dressed for class.

People are accepting, but the one issue I felt was you had to dress a certain way. You had to have the right clothes and the right bag, and I felt like that was a lot of pressure on myself. I talked to other students, now being here for three years, and I realize that it is a main issue that people look down on you, like, ‘Why does she have that bag? It’s not new.’ I felt like having to fit in, I had to have the right clothes and everything. That was an issue that I noticed that we had.

Stephanie, a third-year fabric styling major, talked about why it was difficult for her to make friends at FIT.

I think it's like a little bit of a, I don't want to say clique because it's not like that's a typical high school. But there's a lot of ... almost like it's a little bit like *Mean Girls*, like there's a lot of people thinking they're better than other people. You just become a little bit standoffish at that point, and it's hard to approach people when they act like that. I don't know, I feel like there's not a lot of opportunity to be able to just go up and socialize with people. It's a little bit standoffish with the climate.

Angelica, a third-year fashion merchandising management major, talked about how students come to FIT and expect to behave in a certain way because they are at a fashion school. When asked if it was easy to make friends, she elaborated:

I would say no, just because I feel like everyone comes in here with this notion that they have to be a certain way. People kind of mold themselves into that. People kind of just find their groups and just stick with that; they're not really into meeting other people. I feel like I've almost turned into that; I'm not trying to make any new friends. I feel like first year is when you're the most open, so it's probably easier. I was really open to meeting people my first year.

Most of the third-year participants, in addition to the first-year and second-year participants, said it was difficult to make friends because FIT is a fashion school, and most students felt the fashion world is very difficult place for social interactions.

Overall, participants had many positive interactions with the faculty. This makes sense because FIT is a specialized school and draws some of the best faculty in the industry. While

some participants complained of a few of the professors' teaching styles, most were satisfied with the faculty.

Interactions with the staff were mixed. Many participants felt staff, with the exception of the Residential Life Department and Health Services Department, were neither friendly nor helpful. The participants explained it created a tense atmosphere, and they tried to avoid these offices to prevent an unpleasant situation.

Interactions with the students were also mixed. While some participants stated it was easy to make friends, most felt quite isolated and stated it was very difficult to interact with the students on campus. Participants indicated the reason behind this is FIT is a specialized school where participants arrive knowing their major in their first year. They are driven, competitive, and career-oriented. This leads to some poor interactions among the students, which is why some students felt a lack of sense of belonging.

Campus Environment (First-Year Participants)

Campus environment was another prominent theme that emerged through the data analysis. In this section, I will examine and demonstrate how campus environment can affect a student's sense of belonging at the college.

One of the common sentiments mentioned from the first-year participants is that FIT is a demanding school, and, therefore, the students are competitive, limiting the ability for a nurturing community. Lucy, a first-year fashion design major, stated, "I just think that we don't have much community here because ... I view everyone here as competition." Missy, a first-year fashion merchandising major, echoed Lucy's statement. "I feel like it's more everyone is for themselves." She went on to say:

It's mostly just like who you find and who you're friends with. That's your support, but if you don't find anyone, there's not much [support]. ... I can't think of an actual person to go to that would help you.

Sandra, a first-year fashion merchandising management major, also mentioned the difficulty of interacting with students. She stated, "It's really rare to meet a genuinely good person, and that's so sad to say." When asked to elaborate, she added:

I feel like as soon as you come to FIT, it's like competition. You just think, "Oh, the fashion field." You need to start young, and there is no time to build good friendships. That is so contradictory because they talk about how you need a good network; so you would think people would want good relationships, even with people that their graduating with, but that's not the case.

Many of the first-year participants echoed these sentiments and stated FIT was a difficult place to make friends. During the interviews, many participants mentioned "competition." Unlike most institutions, many students come to FIT with their major already selected and their future career planned. Therefore, the students judge their fellow peers in class and in other situations, which creates a competitive atmosphere. This is why it is not surprising to see how competition can contribute to a lack of a sense of belonging at FIT.

Only two first-year participants indicated a positive sense of belonging; three first-year participants indicated a mixed sense of belonging; and four first-year participants indicated a negative sense of belonging. Lucy, a first-year fashion design major, feels there is something "missing" at FIT. She stated:

We all need a little bit of college. We all need a little bit of familiar faces, and not just make it seem like we're all into our work. I feel like that's where it gets lacking. The

social events, the advisers that look after you, I just feel that we need a little bit more to pull everything together and make it a full experience. I feel like school and social are very disconnected.

Jennifer, a first-year advertising, marketing, and communications major, also said she feels alone at times:

I know I did need a lot of help when I first got here. I was really confused. It was just really hard. Orientation week did help, don't get me wrong, but I feel like after that you're kind of on your own. So I feel like some people like me need a little bit more of a boost and a transition.

Nick, a first-year illustration major, echoed some of Jennifer's sentiments:

New York City's our campus, but it's not the same when you're in a gated community, I guess. I was expecting more school activities that would get the students together.

People here, they keep to themselves. That's what I realized. That's what I noticed living here, and it's really hard to get it out. ... A lot of people just need someone to talk to. It's true. ... We have a sense of community, but not really.

The first-year participants felt that FIT tried to acclimate students to the school.

However, many felt it was "not enough" and shared there needed to be more social programs and support services for first-year students.

Campus Environment (Second-Year Participants)

Second-year participants also mentioned a lack of sense of belonging at the college.

While the word "competition" was not mentioned by the second-year participants as it was with first-year participants, there was still a clear pattern that indicated the difficulty in making friends at FIT. One participant indicated a positive sense of belonging; four second-year participants

indicated a mixed sense of belonging; and five second-year participants indicated a poor sense of belonging. These results were similar to the first-year participants. Liz, a second-year home products major, stated:

I just felt that the orientation itself ... it made it feel very technical, and I don't feel that I met people the same way I hear other people meeting people at orientation. I know even at my last college they kind of had more activities that bonded students in a different way and things like that.

Alicia, a second-year fashion design major, talked about her experiences and said, "I realized that a lot of students here really need that sense of community that FIT somewhat lacks." When I asked was lacking, Alicia explained:

I think maybe it's because we're in New York City, and everyone has stuff to do, or they know what to do to get done Building a sense of community isn't the first thing on their mind, so that's why it's not there. There are some great people here, wonderful people at FIT, but I think they just need the extra push to bring the bond together.

Ashley, a second-year fashion merchandising management major, felt FIT just does not exude a collegiate atmosphere, and the students who attend the institute further compromise the sense of belonging.

That's because it's fashion school. I tell all my friends back home that everyone is so ... it's like a harsh environment. Everyone is so quiet. Everyone keeps to themselves. Everyone has their own groups, but that's because it's fashion school. I guess when you apply here, you know that it's going to be like this because you're in New York. You're in the greatest city in the world, and you're at fashion school. You're surrounded by girls, and girls can be nasty. ... You know that you're expecting this when you come to

school, but I'm not saying that people are mean. People aren't mean; you just need to break through and get to know them. I think that's why it's important to have more events where people can [get to know one another].

Similarly to the first-year participants, second-year participants seem to be most displeased with the social aspect of college life rather than the academic aspect. Participants said there are not enough activities for students to meet one another. The atmosphere within the student population has a competitive nature and because the school – and students – do not initiate enough social interactions, the community life suffers.

Campus Environment (Third-Year Participants)

Sense of belonging continued to be a problem for the third-year participants, as it was for the second-year and first-year participants. Seven participants described their sense of belonging as mixed, whereas three participants described their sense of belonging as poor. Michelle, a third-year fabric styling major, summed up her feelings by sharing the following sentiments:

I have heard a lot of feedback that we don't feel like we really belong. I think I definitely found that to be true as well. I'm not sure what it is, but everyone I've spoken to also, we stayed at FIT ... because it has the name. We know it is going to get us a job, and it's getting the education we want, but we don't necessarily make a lot of friends.

Julia, a third-year fashion merchandising management major, felt she pinpointed the cause of the lack of sense of community:

I've noticed this consistent theme in my time here of people saying, 'I'm not making friends' or 'I'm not getting connected.' Or whatever it is. ... I thought about it so much, and I've tried to figure out why this is happening. It's hard for me to figure out. I think there's a lot of dynamics with it being a fashion school, with it being a school in the city,

with it being a commuter school, with it being a career-oriented school and not necessarily a school-oriented school, if that makes sense.

Rebecca, a third-year textile development major, echoed Julia's sentiments and shared similar reasons for the lack of sense of community.

These students are 17, 18, probably Anyway, you're that young, and you're thrown into this environment, and all you talk about is your career constantly. I understand that's a huge priority, but my sister she went to a traditional college – the sorority life, the Greek life, and it was a very small campus, but I think there's more of the community sense.

It was very clear from all three groups that participants feel a lack of sense of belonging at FIT. Many of the participants shared it was difficult to meet other students, and there were not enough social activities to bring about better interactions. The majority of the participants also said the college was a unique place because it is a career-oriented fashion school in which people are very driven, competitive, and cold at times. Participants felt insecure with their appearance if they were wearing the wrong items and felt very isolated in certain situations.

Communicative Support (First-Year Participants)

Communicative support was another prominent theme that emerged from the data analysis. In this section, communicative support from the college to its students will be examined to demonstrate how FIT's communicative support to its students affects their sense of belonging at the institute.

Only two participants from the first-year sample felt they received positive communicative support from FIT, whereas eight participants from the first-year sample felt they received mixed communicative support. Lucy, a first-year fashion design major, was the most

vocal first-year participant regarding communication and was very frustrated with how the college communicates to its students.

I just think that everything needs to be more fluid. We get so many notifications. FIT is so on top of making students feel like they know what's going on, they know what's going on in this university, what opportunities are available to them. But yet [it is] so lacking in many of the important ones because the school thinks that it's obvious.

I probed Lucy a little bit further and asked for her to go into more detail regarding some of the more important opportunities the school thinks is obvious. Lucy shared:

There's just a lot of questions I have. I also know that there's a lot of questions I should have, that I don't know that I should be questioning because I don't know about them. I'll hear about it from someone else, and they're like, 'Have you signed up for this?' Well, I don't even know about it because how am I supposed to know about it? I always feel like there're things going on that I don't know about. As a university that's trying to bring us all together, I disagree with that.

Lucy also shared that seeking help was frustrating. She talked about the difficulty of determining where students could direct their questions regarding classes and credits. Lucy felt it was not clearly explained and that different departments gave different answers.

They say, 'You can come to me with questions,' and I do believe that everyone is here to help, but I don't know how to get to you. It's much bigger than a high school, where if you have a question about counseling, you can go to the counselor. If you don't feel good, you can go to the nurse. But here it's like, I have a question about credits. Okay. Do I go to Professor Buchman? Do I go to the Academic Advisement Center? I had a

question about psych credits. Do I go to the Psych Department? Or do I go to the Registrar's Office? And all four of them tell me to go to the other departments.

Tina, a first-year fashion merchandising management major, echoed some of Lucy's sentiments. She mentioned that the Fashion Institute of Technology offers a lot of support but does a poor job of advertising and communicating that support with its student population.

What I think is that they really should promote that they have those supports because a lot of people don't know that we have counseling, and for people to go talk to them, and talk about their problems, and they have this tutoring center, and all those [other resources]. A lot of people don't know it because they don't really get promoted, I feel like. I got to learn about them through professors because they talk about it in class, but otherwise, I never really hear about them. I don't see any papers on the boards or anything. I feel like they should promote [these services] more.

Lack of awareness regarding the support services the college offers seemed to be a recurring theme. While support is available, the first-year participant group did not seem to know about it. Susan, a first-year fashion merchandising management major, shared that the students at FIT are just not aware of the services the college offers.

I think there's a need of more open support. I just know that we have support because I needed it, so I went and found it, but I don't think a lot of people know how much support we actually have. ... I know we have counseling, but I think that needs to be more widely known. Health Services really helps out a lot because they give massages as stress relievers. But I think the support is what's needed most because people are away from home, and although they do have phones, it's not the same as having a support system with you. So if they know that they have someone that they can talk to or

someone that can help them with something, it helps 10 times more for them to get through the day.

Sandra, a first-year fashion merchandising management major, shared her concerns about FIT not promoting its services.

I think you guys need to advertise it more. I really do because I didn't know there was a counseling center until the end of the first semester. I think that I would have used it a lot, honestly. ... Personally I don't remember it, and at the end, My mom's like 'Don't you guys have counseling service?' I was like, 'Yeah I think so.' That's so sad to say.

It was clear from the first-year participant group that they want an orientation that better acclimates them to the support services the school offers. Most of the participants felt they were unaware of how to seek assistance regarding counseling issues, registration issues, class credit issues, and who to go to for certain problems. The first-year group also said the school needs to better advertise its services and communicate these services much more efficiently to help students have a better first-year experience.

Communicative Support (Second-Year Participants)

Similarly to the first-year group, the second-year participants also felt communicative support was an issue. Seven participants from the second-year group felt they received mixed communicative support, whereas three participants from the second-year group felt they received poor communicative support. Rachel, a second-year advertising, marketing, and communications major, felt that knowing about the services FIT offers is critical and that the college needs to more effectively communicate its services to the students.

The more information you know, the better. If I had found out about the Writing Studio, I could have done so much. When you are so confused, and you don't know what to do,

and now you don't know who to talk to about it, that's definitely the hardest thing. So I think just definitely knowing that you have outlets and that you have resources and what they are. I mean, the less confused you are in general with something like school, the easier it is for you to just kind of relax and be able to meet people and just feel like you belong here.

Liz, a second-year home products major, felt communication needed to be better streamlined for all students.

I think that it's just more the disconnect and trying to make it feel more like college, whatever that may be. I think that's the biggest sort of complaint, one that I've heard, and just having a lot of communication because I feel like also we do have a lot of commuters, have a lot of people at all different places, not just on campus, even in their first year. I think that making sure communication is the same no matter where someone lives or no matter what their schedule is [is important]. For especially campus-wide things it's really important because I know I have and some of my friends have not known about things that get out and have just shown up, and something was cancelled.

Ashley, a second-year fashion merchandising management major, discussed how she had been at an orientation at her former institution, where "We had to take a class on how to successfully utilize a library, and I know that they don't teach you that here." Ashley felt her orientation program at her former school better prepared students for college. She went on to say:

Also, just like little things like when you walk past, for example, the English Department or the Art History Department or like all their offices, outside they have a schedule of all

the professors and the dates that they're in school and the times that they're in school.

No one really knows that until you actually walk past and see it.

Ashley continued to explain that communication regarding the services was substandard. She mentioned there are a lot of services for students, but students are just not made aware of them.

The first time I found out about tutoring was through one of my classes. Again, that could be mentioned earlier, like a student joins the school [and someone tells her], 'This is an option for you if you're ever finding things hard. You can always go to academic tutoring. It's free. It's easy. You're going to be meeting new people.'... I think there's loads of things that can help you at the school, but sometimes people just don't know of them.

Candace, a second-year fashion merchandising management major, also shared how students are unaware of services. She said, "I didn't know tutoring was a thing until this year. I don't know why I didn't know last year. I just feel like they should have more emphasis on how to get help, where it is, and stuff like that."

Similarly to the first-year group, the second-year group had the same complaint: FIT does not effectively communicate its support services to students. Many were unaware of certain services until the end of their first year. Ursula, a second-year fashion design major, feels the more that FIT does to help the students adjust will lead to a better student experience.

The more information you could give someone, knowledge is power. So, the more information you could give to someone who doesn't know, that would be good, much, much more helpful. They would understand the city better. They would understand FIT better. They would have a better time adjusting and make quicker time adjusting. I think

it's really a good idea if you guys are investing more time and resources in it to help your students. I think it's really a good thing.

Another aspect of orientation that the second-year group discussed was how the college could have done a better job of acclimating students to New York City. Taryn, a second-year fashion merchandising management major, said:

I think one of the top things I would have wanted was a little bit of education about the city itself, since the city is our campus. I would have wanted to know more about the subways, routes of transportation I could take, buses, trains, all of that. I had no idea. I'm from Buffalo, so I didn't know what to expect. That was a little confusing and maybe just like hotspots of where to go. I think my RA, she tried, but I felt like it would have been nice to have a little bit more direction. She tried to bring us on trips and stuff. I feel like if that could be a part of the program, I think students would really like that because they would feel more comfortable with the city in where they're going.

Clark, a second-year advertising, marketing, and communications major, mentioned that a better orientation to New York City is important for first-year students.

A better education of you in the city, what you can take advantage of, what you shouldn't take advantage of, because I know there are some people that they partied out freshman year. Those resources are there, but they are not comprehending them, so maybe a different direction to comprehend them.

When compared with the first-year group, the second-year group had similar complaints. It is clear the participants who were interviewed feel a lack of communication from the college regarding support services for students, and they recommend offering an orientation of New

York City, their community. The second-year student group felt that if FIT better advertised and communicated its services to students, there would be an increased sense of belonging.

Communicative Support (Third-Year Participants)

Similarly to the second-year group, the third-year group also felt communicative support was an issue. Nine participants from the third-year group felt they received mixed communicative support from FIT, whereas one participant from the third-year group reported receiving poor communicative support. Abigail, a third-year advertising, marketing, and communications major, spoke about a similar experience to Lucy, a first-year fashion design major. She mentioned communication with many of the administrative offices is difficult.

I know that in offices like the bursar or cashiering, when you try to call and get an answer, you get transferred and then transferred back and then transferred. It is just a lot of transferring, and no one really seems to know what is going on or who I can talk to. I get a lot of different answers before I arrive at the correct one. I just get sent around a lot. I know if I have an administrative question, I have to dedicate a lot of time to go and get it answered because I am walking back and forth between buildings and offices to try to find someone to talk to.

Abigail also mentioned that when she was a first-year student, she was unaware of how to seek assistance, which was a common complaint across the participants. When asked about what was lacking in a first-year experience, she said:

I think just more guidance in general. I didn't really know some of the things I was supposed to do or how I was supposed to do it. I kind of found out with trial and error or through other friends, like the registration process or financial things or just even that the buildings connect all the way through. So just more guidance.

Mia, a third-year advertising, marketing, and communication major, also shared that the college could do a better job with explaining resources to students.

Because people I think when they first come here, they don't know what the library has to offer. They don't know the computer labs. They don't even know what a computer lab is. I always hear that from freshmen, so I think actually showing them, like these are the resources. You should use them, and the databases that we have are amazing. Maybe explaining it more in depth, having professors explain more in depth where they can go.

Elli, a third year fashion merchandising management major, shared a similar complaint: I feel like maybe there was some kind of seminar in orientation that I didn't go to. I feel like we didn't get told about the services that we had until I actually really needed them. Then I found out on my own. Even during orientation ... they didn't tell us about the Health Center or the Counseling Center. I just found out about that on my own. I was like, 'Oh, I'm sick. Let me find out where I can go.' Or, 'I need to go to therapy, where can I go?'

Elli also mentioned that communication with some of the administrative offices was nebulous and difficult at times, which affected her feelings about the school.

I had a big issue with the Counseling Center because I was going to see ... somebody for weekly therapy, and then after a while, she was like, 'Yeah, well, I can't see you anymore because this is only for short-term treatment.' And I was like, 'Okay, so what am I supposed to do now?' And she was like, 'Oh, you're going to have to go find someone elsewhere.' And I was like, 'Well, what if I can't afford that? What if my insurance doesn't cover that? I thought this is what the school is for.' And she was like, 'Oh, no, we can't help you.' So then I ended up calling the head of the Counseling Department,

and she was like, ‘Yeah, well, you should have been told that this is short term.’ And I was like, ‘Nobody told me that ever. They said they were going to help me.’ And then she was like, ‘Well, if you really think you’re that unstable, maybe you should go to the emergency room.’ My mom was there, too, on the phone. She was like, ‘Excuse me? Are you telling my daughter to go to the emergency room when she clearly doesn’t need to go?’

Mia also shared the same sentiments about services.

I feel like a lot of people don’t know [about the services FIT offers]. When I told people that I was going to the Tutoring Center, they were like, ‘What’s that?’ Nobody knows. It’s great that we have it, but nobody knows about it. [As another example], I was in the cafeteria, and I was listening to these people give speeches for ... some elections. They were like, ‘I’m trying to be president of the Whatever Committee,’ and I’m like, ‘What are these things?’ I didn’t know these existed, and I’ve been here for so long, and I’m just hearing about these things. So I think it would be good to educate people, to tell them what’s out there, what services we have, what clubs we have.

Stephanie, a third-year fabric styling major, felt communication was the biggest problem at FIT. She said, “I know there’s already a lot of events and things that are happening. I find out about stuff after it happens. I’m like, ‘Oh, that could have been useful.’ ... There’s a big communication issue I’ve noticed.”

Overall, participants complained about how FIT communicates to its students. Most felt the college takes many things for granted and assumes students know about certain services. Participants said they want clearer communication regarding social events, how to seek assistance if in need, how to register for certain courses, and more guidance for first-year

students. Participants felt the college needs to better prepare them during their first year for an increased sense of belonging and for success at the college.

Opportunities (First-Year Participants)

Opportunities to improve the first-year experience for FIT students was another prominent theme that emerged from the data analysis. This section will examine how these opportunities could improve their sense of belonging and the first-year experience at the college.

According to the first-year participants, the creation of a first-year experience program at the Fashion Institute of Technology would improve a first-year student's experience (nine out of 10 indicated a positive response). Missy, a first-year fashion merchandising management major, felt this program could only help students.

It will give you more knowledge about everything that's going on. You will feel like you belong more because you know how this works, or the different options you have. It will make you feel more comfortable and confident that you're actually doing the right things, or what you really want to do.

Linda, a first-year fashion merchandising management major, shared that the creation of a first-year experience program would make students feel more comfortable at FIT and broaden their horizons regarding the opportunities available at the college.

I think that if you did this, they would be more comfortable, and they would have a sense of belonging to school. They'd feel more like they know about it, and they know what to do, what their opportunities are. And if they didn't choose to do something it is because they didn't want to or because they didn't know about it.

Lucy, a first-year fashion design, major felt a first-year experience program could augment a student's sense of belonging to the institution.

If we show them that Orientation Week is going to take you through that process, make you more comfortable, introduce you to different things, make you realize that there are people to reach out to, I think that would just be very appealing to the new students.

Another area of importance in the opportunities theme was participants' thoughts regarding the components needed for this first-year experience program to succeed. Lucy said, "I think that it should continue throughout the year." Sandra, a first-year fashion merchandising management major, felt a required course would be the best format for students. She added:

I think a course would be actually somewhat helpful – a required course that would be for first-year, first-semester students, like the building blocks of how to adjust to living in the city, being in fashion school, what to expect, what courses, and how you need to handle those.

Susan, a first-year fashion merchandising management major, shared that some type of course that incorporated skills on time management, financial management, and interpersonal relations would be helpful for first-year students.

I feel a lot of people don't know how to time-manage when it comes to school. They really need to learn how to balance. I feel like some people don't know how to be social, and I know that's kind of hard at our school because we're not the average college, but I feel some people would need to know that, to know how to do that. But mainly, for me, it would be the educational part, like the time management and the financial management as well, because this is the first year away from family, and some people really don't know how to spend their money and don't know how to save the money that they get.

Tabitha, a first-year graphic design major, felt professors could play a much more active role by providing students with career-based assignments so students could test drive their major and decide if it is the right fit for them.

I think it would be good if the professors of the majors that [students] want to pursue tell them firsthand what they're getting themselves into. Different industry-based assignments and stuff and trying out different things so they know where they could go more specifically.

It was clear from speaking with the first-year group that students would benefit from a more comprehensive first-year experience. First-year participants indicated they want a course that focuses on acclimating students to their new environment and continues throughout the semester or year. Participants mentioned this course should prepare students on interpersonal skills, time management, financial management, and connecting them with various support services at the college. Participants also felt that innovative workshops, conducted by professors or leaders in the fashion industry, would better acclimate students to their future career path. As was mentioned earlier, participants complained about the lack of communication regarding support services at the college; these participants felt lost at times and disconnected. These participants collectively suggested the college may want to look into a course or seminar that provides social and academic support to better orient first-year students to the Fashion Institute of Technology.

Opportunities (Second-Year Participants)

Similarly to the first-year group, the second-year group felt the creation of a first-year experience program at FIT would improve a first-year student's experience (10 out of 10

indicated a positive response). When asked about the impact this program would have on students, Liz, a second-year home products major, said:

I think it's a strong one. ... Even just knowing people is a big deal. ... I think this program could sort of match people with similar interests, or people might become friends with people they would never have met without it, which I think is important just for comfort level, just to feel like they know people, not just from their floor, but as they're walking through school. I think that's a big part of that, and I think once people feel that comfort with people, they're more inclined to do things on campus and get involved. ... Someone might be like, 'Come to this meeting with me' or 'I'm doing this tonight.' I think that would just make campus feel better.

Taryn, a second-year fashion merchandising management major, mentioned that creating a first-year experience would make students feel better about attending FIT.

I think that if people heard that FIT is a lot more of a welcoming place, and 'Yes, it's easy to make friends here; yeah, the transition from high school to college is hard, but we can help you.' I think that it would bring a lot more people to the school. ... I've spoken to a few people that were thinking of applying, and they're like, 'Oh, but I'm not sure I'll fit in there. I'm not sure it will be a place for me.' ... I think this program could bring about a change in that view.

Ashley, a second-year fashion merchandising management major, also echoed some of Taryn's comments regarding the importance of creating a first-year student experience program. Ashley felt this program is needed due to the difficulty of making friends at FIT.

I think it's a really, really good idea. I think it's definitely necessary. I think a first-year program is something that should continue through the year. I think that would be a

really good step forward to help people fit into the school better and make more friends because I know that the making-friends issue is one of the biggest things that people have to deal with in this school.

Another important aspect of the opportunities theme was to discuss the possible programmatic aspects needed to make a first-year experience program successful. Alicia, a second-year fashion design major, felt a mentorship pairing an upperclassman and a first-year participant would be beneficial. She said it would be good having a “program where an upperclassman would be assigned to a freshman and hang out with them or just to share that bond because sometimes you do need someone that’s older to guide you through.”

Alicia also felt the creation of a first-year experience course or seminar would help new students and teach them career-building skills, academic skills, and social skills, which she felt was important.

I know my friends’ colleges, their freshman years, they’re required to sign up for these freshman seminars, and they not only talk about career building and what you should do to become a better student, all the academic stuff, but they also talk about social skills. I think [during] the seminars, they also go on excursions. Maybe just to have that and discuss how you can become a better person [would be helpful at FIT].

Trinity, a second-year illustration major, thought it would be beneficial to have special presentations or lectures regarding topic areas that would be helpful for freshmen, e.g. time management, financial management, and support services.

Maybe [it would be good] to do specific lectures according to majors like, ‘This is where you are now; here are students who are in the bachelor’s; this is where you can go; these are your options past the associate’s; this is why FIT is a great school.’

Trinity also mentioned a similar sentiment that Alicia had, which was to incorporate upperclassmen into this first-year experience program.

[FIT could consider] a mentorship [program] with somebody in the upper division. Do I want to stay here? Is this the right school for me? This is what I'm going to be doing for the next four years of my life. This is the amount of work you're going to be doing. An honest opinion from upperclassmen would be really good.

Candace, a second-year fashion merchandising management major, stated that FIT needed to improve its communication to students regarding the support services offered, in addition to acclimating them to New York City.

Maybe they could provide counseling to make sure those students are clear that they can make appointments with counselors and get the help they need for interviews and finding jobs in the Counseling Center. A big challenge would be living in a huge city rather than where they're coming from, and they could help that maybe just by providing people with tips on safety and how to get around the city more and having a place where they can reach out and get the help they need if they're not comfortable, or they need help with something. Also the schoolwork. I know it's different from being a high school senior and coming here and having a lot more responsibility. Make sure that services are known to the students, like the Tutoring Center and how to get help from a teacher through email and stuff like that.

Overall, the second-year group provided similar responses as the first-year sample, with few variations. The second-year participants indicated the need for some type of first-year experience program to better acclimate students to FIT. These participants mentioned the college needs to offer a seminar, course, or program that provides the tools needed for students to

develop time management, financial management, study skills, social skills, and interpersonal skills, as well as an orientation to all the support services the college offers to its students. A few participants also felt a mentorship program between an upperclassman and first-year student would help students “learn the ropes” at college and prepare them to meet the school’s expectations.

Opportunities (Third-Year Participants)

Similarly to the second-year and first-year group, the third-year group felt the creation of a first-year experience program at the Fashion Institute of Technology would improve a first-year student’s experience (10 out of 10 indicated a positive response). Mia, a third-year advertising, marketing, and communications major, stated that a first-year experience program would bring the college’s campus community together.

I want to say more inclusion because I feel like one of the skills that I think was really beneficial to me was networking – not just professionally, but socially, being able to talk to people. I think that this program will be a start to get out of your comfort zone and talk to people and get to know more about them, because there are other people where they are outgoing, and they don’t care, they’ll talk. There’s always people that are a little bit quiet, so I guess making them feel more comfortable to talk and to get out what they have to say.

Elli, a third-year fashion merchandising management major, talked about how many students feel a lack of a sense of belonging at college and how creating a program could improve the mindset of students at the college.

So, clearly, a lot of people feel this way, and I think that we could feel that way less if there was something like [a first-year experience program] to take from the start. I feel

like if we did it now, for a third-year student, it would be like, 'Right. Well, the damage is already done. We're already basically done.' But if you're doing it right when people are coming in ... they're probably going to have worries, like 'Oh, I'm going to have no friends,' or whatever. But they're not going to know that FIT has no sense of community. If they come in, and they do this program, they're going to think, 'Oh, FIT has this great sense of community, and I belong here.' I think if you come in with that mindset from the start, freshman year, the beginning, it'll make a whole difference, especially after all of us are gone, the mean, not-friendly people. And you have all the new people who are coming in going through this [program]; I think that it would totally make a difference in the grand scheme of things.

Michelle, a third-year fabric styling major, felt this program could have a very positive effect on a student's sense of belonging.

I think it could really, really help, actually. The more you know, the more skills you have to do well here and make it feel like your home, the more you're going to feel like it really is a place that you belong. Again, you'll be able to meet so many other different people and make more friends and stuff, which will really, really help.

It was very clear that participants feel a first-year experience program would benefit first-year students, in addition to facilitating their sense of belonging at the college.

Similarly to the first-year and second-year participants, the third-year participants also had many ideas on the components needed to make this program successful. Julia, a third-year fashion merchandising management major, felt taking students in groups to off-campus events and empowering them to experience their community would be a beneficial growing experience and would help students feel more comfortable.

My big thought with it is to put them in groups where they give them a reason to invest in other students I think motivating students to invest in each other is really important. And kind of breaking it down and taking them off campus to experience things together could also be really good. The reality is you need your students to feel like adults, and you need to feel empowered.

Abigail, a third-year advertising, marketing, and communications major, did not feel a traditional seminar or course would be too enticing to students. However, she felt a social and interactive leadership course would be very helpful.

I think it would be nice to build community and just have that same group of people you are coming back to and working with for a semester. I don't know about a class like teaching study methods and things like that. I think people would get frustrated with that and get bored with that because it is something that is hammered into us in high school, I think. I think that if it was like a class, I just would imagine it to be very social and interactive. I think it would help build support among the students. I kind of picture something like a leadership workshop, just a lot of leadership and team-building exercises to learn how to work with others, but also exercises and activities that are more introspective to learn about yourself.

Elli, a third-year fashion merchandising management major, felt it would be helpful to have a support group where students could share difficulties they are having with adjustment or problems with classes or roommates.

You definitely develop so much in your first year of college. Everything is so different. Your life is totally changing. So I think it would be really cool to have this group of people. I don't know how many people, like 10 or 15, in a group or class. . . . Like have

you be there at the beginning of school, talk, get to know each other, do a bonding thing. Then throughout the year, check in and do more bonding things. ... [It's] almost like a support group kind of type thing, talking about struggles people are facing. Obviously, everybody's going to have struggles and problems adjusting, problems with their classes, problems with their roommates. It's endless. So I think it would be cool if we were able to do something where the students could really feel safe and comfortable with their little group that they have. Then they would have a place to come and have a support group-type setting and talk about what's going on and help each other. Then maybe they'll become friends outside and hang out. I think that'd be great.

Julie, an international trade and marketing major, felt students needed to be prepared to handle a variety of situations to grow and successfully move into adulthood. She mentioned this program would need to include the aforementioned elements for success.

I feel like in terms of maturing, just teaching them how to adapt and respond to different situations will help them grow and mature. ... I feel like common-sense-like things need to be taught, and there needs to be some sort of way to teach students, 'You're going to be handling this problem and this problem and this problem, and these are ways that you can go about solving these problems and overcoming the challenges that you are going to face,' and just with them being able to know that they'll be able to develop on their own.

Overall, it was clear from the third-year group that developing a first-year experience program would benefit the student population. The third-year group had the most hindsight regarding ways to improve students' sense of belonging. This group of participants felt that a social or interactive course that teaches leadership skills, social skills, and study skills would better acclimate students to the college. Additionally, it was mentioned that this type of program

would need to prepare students to adapt and respond to difficult situations to grow as an individual and succeed in college. The third-year group also shared that they did not learn about many of the support services offered by the college until much later in their college career. They felt that if the college better communicated these support services, they would have had fewer problems adjusting. The third-year group unanimously felt this type of program would have been very helpful to them as students and would have made a positive impact on their experience at FIT.

Discussion

As was stated earlier, in the most current Student Opinions Survey (2012), FIT ranked in the bottom half of schools for all items measuring student satisfaction with various campus services. Only 59% of students felt a sense of belonging to the campus (ranked 14th out of 27 schools in the SUNY system). Given this information, in its most current strategic plan the college mentioned developing a first-year experience program for students. FIT has not yet defined what it wants in a first-year experience program; therefore, this exploratory study sought to gather information from first-, second-, and third-year on-campus students to better understand their perception of their first-year experience in relation to support they receive from the Fashion Institute of Technology. The key themes in this study revolved around interpersonal relationships, communicative support, and opportunities provided by the college.

Positive Relationships Promote a Healthy Community

It was clear from my 30 interviews that positive interactions were associated with a higher degree of sense of belonging, and they made students feel more comfortable within their campus environment. This result also correlates with previous research studies by Wilcox, Winn, and Fyvie-Gauld (2005); Handel (2007); and Habley, McClanahan, Valiga, and Burkum

(2010). Participants with positive interactions indicated a better sense of belonging with FIT, and they were more willing to attend social events and use support services. Mullendore and Banahan (2005) state, “The foundation of successful orientation programs continues to rely on ... assisting students to become familiar with the campus and the community; and providing structured opportunities for students to interact with faculty, staff, and current students (pp. 398–399).

A little more than half of participants in all three groups were pleased with the faculty at FIT. Overall, 17 participants had positive interactions, and 12 had mixed interactions (one participant did not discuss interactions with faculty). Many indicated the faculty were leaders in the industry, available to students, and taught students the skills they needed to have a successful career in the fashion industry.

Interactions with staff at FIT provided more mixed responses. Overall, 12 participants indicated positive interactions; 15 participants indicated mixed interactions; and three participants indicated negative interactions (two participants did not discuss their interactions with staff). Many described that some departments were very helpful and seemed happy to assist students at the college. These departments included the Residential Life Department, Health Services Department, and the Tutoring Center. Other offices received more mixed interactions by participants. Many complained about the Bursar’s Department and Registrar’s Department. They stated these departments were unfriendly, did not communicate effectively with students, and seemed unhappy to be working at FIT, which made students feel uncomfortable.

In general, participants in all three groups described that the most mixed interactions occurred with other students. Overall, five participants indicated positive interactions; 18 indicated mixed interactions; and five indicated poor interactions (two participants did not

discuss their interactions with students). Many said it was very difficult to make friends and explained this was due to the “competitive nature” of the student population and because the college was career driven. The student population’s mentality of typical FIT students is that they are ambitious and concerned about school rather than making friends. The majority of participants commented this made them feel very isolated at times and made it difficult to adjust to college life.

Communication Drives a Sense of Belonging

The college’s communication about student services received mixed to poor responses. Overall, only two out of 30 participants indicated a positive response regarding communications about support FIT provides. Twenty-two participants indicated a mixed response, and four participants indicated a poor response (two participants did not discuss communications regarding support from FIT). Many of the participants had trouble listing all of the support services FIT offered and felt the college needed to do a better job of making students aware of these services.

Participants from the second-year and third-year samples said they found out about the support service offerings only when they needed them, and the students often got their information through friends rather than the college. This is not surprising given that a previously discussed study by Schrader and Brown (2008) indicated students in a first-year experience program at Northeastern University had much better knowledge of support services at the university than those who did not enroll in the program. Some of the third-year participants in this study stated they wished FIT had introduced these services during orientation so students were aware they could seek help when needed. In fact, communication was so poor, many of the participants felt FIT did not care about their development. Overall, three participants out of 30

indicated they had a positive sense of belonging. Fourteen participants indicated a mixed sense of belonging, and 13 indicated a poor sense of belonging. Again, this feedback was similar to the problems students noted on the Student Opinions Survey (SOS). Participants do not have a positive sense of belonging, are frustrated with much of the staff and students, and are confused about the services offered to them. On the 2009 National Survey of First-Year Seminars (National Resource Center for the First-Year Experience and Students in Transition, 2011), additional objectives most reported for first-year experience programs were developing a connection with the institution (50.2%) and providing an orientation to various campus resources and services (47.6%). Having a sense of belonging and communicative support regarding campus resources and services are crucial areas that FIT needs to address better.

Students Want a More Comprehensive First-Year Experience

Overall, 29 out of the 30 participants interviewed felt the creation of a first-year experience program would be beneficial and provide a positive impact to first-year students. As past research has indicated, a first-year experience program gives students the opportunity to have a successful transition to their new college or university surroundings (Tsui & Gao, 2007; Woosley & Miller, 2009). Additionally, “Extended first-year transition programs provide the opportunity for depth and breadth in areas that are critical to student success” (Habley, Bloom, & Robbins, 2012). Participants felt a course over the semester or year would be ideal. Many from the sample indicated a first-year experience course would need to address time management, financial management, social adjustment, adaptability to difficult situations, and how to connect to support services from the college. These participants also felt professors could offer innovative workshops or discussion groups throughout the year to give students further opportunities to develop.

The participants wanted a first-year experience to increase social interactions. The majority of the complaints by this group of participants was the fact that the college does not provide enough social support and programs for students. Participants mentioned it was very difficult to make friends at the college, and this program should provide more opportunities so students are able to meet and mingle.

Lastly, participants felt it would be helpful to have a mentorship program or buddy system where first-year students could meet with an upperclassman in their major and ask questions pertaining to their chosen field of study or other aspects related to FIT, supporting findings by Rode (2002) and Astin (1965) that indicated peer mentorship is critical for academic and personal success.

Chapter V

Conclusions

The purpose of this study was to investigate students' perceptions of their first-year experience in relation to support they receive from the Fashion Institute of Technology. Through qualitative methods, I interviewed 30 students (10 first-years, 10 second-years, and 10 third-years) who live on campus at the Fashion Institute of Technology (FIT), a State University of New York (SUNY) college of art, business, design, and technology connected to the fashion industry. FIT has a campus located in Manhattan with approximately 10,000 students enrolled and 2,300 living on campus (Fashion Institute of Technology, 2013).

This research is important because it provides information that can shape the overall success of the institution. As Koch and Gardner (2006) point out, the first-year experience is not a single program or initiative, but rather an intentional combination of academic and co-curricular efforts designed and implemented to strengthen the quality of student learning and satisfaction at a college.

As previously stated, the Student Opinions Survey (SOS), which each of SUNY's 27 institutions is required to administer every three years, revealed FIT ranked in the bottom half of schools for all items measuring student satisfaction with various campus services. Only 59% of FIT students felt a sense of belonging to the campus (ranked 14th). Only 67% percent of FIT students were satisfied with non-teaching staff members' respect for students (ranked 25th), compared with 76% of all other SUNY students. Sixty-four percent of students were satisfied with FIT's billing and payment processes (ranked 14th), and 59% of students were satisfied with FIT's career planning services (ranked 14th). Fifty-seven percent of students were satisfied with financial aid services (ranked 16th); 55% were satisfied with general academic advising (ranked

21st); and only half were satisfied with the course registration process (ranked 21st). Lastly, FIT ranked 24th on major-specific academic advising, with 59% of students reporting satisfaction, compared with 68% of all other SUNY students. Therefore, providing a more positive experience is something administrators at the college are trying to achieve for their students.

This study's findings enabled me to answer the research questions outlined in chapters one and three. The following section summarizes the findings for each research question and describes the challenges for students at FIT and how a first-year experience seminar or course could benefit them and increase their sense of belonging. Limitations of the study are then described, and recommendations for future research are offered. This chapter concludes with recommendations for university leaders and policymakers.

Summary of Findings

Research Question 1: *What types of social, academic, and financial support are available for first-year students at FIT?*

Social, academic, and financial supports are important factors to consider when developing a first-year experience program that engages students to improve their first-year experience and augment their sense of belonging. Barton and Donahue (2010) confirmed in their quantitative study that there is a statistically significant association between students' expectations or outcomes and whether they had taken a first-year experience program. These outcomes were measured by answers provided in the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE). Students in their study also indicated that a variety of variables, such as coursework, academic help, relationships with faculty, expectations for obtaining academic help, attending campus events, and attending creative art events or venues, could increase their success. This information is noteworthy because the participants in this qualitative study also indicated more

support would increase student success. While the Fashion Institute of Technology has a variety of support services for students, only two out of 30 participants indicated a positive response regarding support from the college. It was clear from the research that FIT students are unaware of the services available to them.

Five out of 30 participants indicated positive support from other students, and 12 out of 30 participants indicated positive support from staff. Within these interactions, students expressed the most dissatisfaction with social support at the college. Across all three subgroups, participants noted there were not enough opportunities to meet other students and that the college too narrowly focused on preparing students for the industry. Participants felt they were so busy with classes and internships they did not have time to participate in student-life events. Most participants were also unaware of the types of social support the college offers. Some participants discussed the Counseling Center and resident assistants, but they could not think of other types of support. Participants also felt that when they tried to seek assistance, the staff were not helpful and treated the students disrespectfully.

Academic support was more positive than social support, with 17 out of 30 participants indicating they have received positive academic support. This response is unsurprising because many interviewees talked about coming to FIT due to the respected faculty. Most participants felt faculty were accommodating, friendly, and well-prepared to train students for a career in the fashion industry. Participants also spoke positively of the Writing Studio and said it was instrumental in helping them improve their academic writing. However, it should be noted there were slightly more mixed responses regarding the Academic Advisement Center depending on the staff member with whom the student had interacted. Some students felt certain staff

members at the center made class selection much easier, whereas others felt other staff members were unaware of the course offerings and were not helpful.

Participants did not have much of an opinion regarding financial support at the college. Participants felt the college provided a good education and was relatively inexpensive when compared with most private schools. Participants did state there were a number of scholarships available to students who perform well academically; however, they noted additional scholarships could always be made available. Participants with the most complaints about financial support were international students. Many of the international participants shared there was no financial support available to them, which made funding their education difficult.

It was clear that FIT does not provide enough support to its students. These results are bolstered by findings from Morrow and Ackerman (2012), who investigated the importance of motivation and sense of belonging as they relate to retention. Morrow and Ackerman found that increased levels of peer support, faculty support, classroom comfort, intrinsic value, instrumental value, and personal development lead to increased persistence into the second year of college. While this particular study did not find a direct link regarding sense of belonging and retention, it did find a direct link between communicative support and student satisfaction. Therefore, it would be advantageous for FIT to ensure it is effectively communicating its types of support for students to increase their satisfaction, which could improve their first-year experience.

Research Question 2: *What challenges do FIT students experience in their first year, and how could a first-year experience program lessen these challenges?*

The first major challenge at FIT revolved around social support. Participants discussed making friends as one of the biggest hurdles at FIT and stated the college does not offer enough social activities and programs for students to interact. Many participants discussed the culture of

the fashion industry and labeled it as inhospitable and competitive, where students are judged by the way they are dressed. Further compromising a collegiate atmosphere is the fact that students are too preoccupied with classes, internships, and furthering their careers. This information is consistent with a qualitative study by Wilcox, Winn, and Fyvie-Gauld (2005), which revealed students who were unable to make friends struggled or reported being homesick. This could be a consequence of having a lack of social support. The authors summarized that a combination of making friends early in the freshman year and relying on home support were critical for students' retention. This study's results did not find that provision of social support is conducive to student retention; however, results of this research did indicate that lack of social support led to dissatisfaction regarding their first-year experience. Therefore, it is recommended that FIT find alternative ways to provide more social support, especially in the first few weeks of classes.

Participants also reported finding it difficult to interact with the staff at FIT. Participants expressed the most displeasure with the Bursar's Department and Registrar's Department. Many participants said the staff, in general, were unfriendly and disinterested with working at the college. Participants were hesitant to seek help due to perceived apathy from staff; they reported having received incorrect information or different answers depending on the department from which they were seeking help. It is critical to note this lack of support is a crucial roadblock for FIT. Brinkworth, McCann, Matthews, and Nordström (2008) conducted a broad survey study of first-year expectations regarding teaching and learning. Results from their study indicated many students felt they were not supported enough by their teachers/staff and were expecting more feedback on assignments, as well as increased support during their first year in college. Students also felt working with other students and learning from enthusiastic teachers and staff was

beneficial. Therefore, it is important that the college address this perceived apathy to improve the experience for students.

The second major challenge revolved around communication at the college. As stated earlier, only two out of 30 participants reported positive communicative support from the college. Participants said the college's staff and faculty do not communicate effectively and had limited knowledge of the Counseling Center, Health Services Department, Student Life Department, Writing Studio, Academic Advisement Center, etc. Participants stated that information regarding these services was not covered in Orientation Week, which meant some participants only discovered these services well into their second or third year. Many participants expressed that had they known that about these services, they would have felt more of a sense of belonging and better acclimated both socially and academically at FIT. On the 2009 National Survey of First-Year Seminars (National Resource Center for the First-Year Experience and Students in Transition, 2011), additional objectives most reported by colleges for orientation programs were to provide information about various campus resources and services (47.6%). This study indicated that students do not feel they received a proper orientation regarding resources and services available at FIT; therefore, it is highly recommended that FIT work toward improving its communicative support to students about campus resources and services.

Overwhelmingly, 29 out of 30 participants indicated a first-year experience course or seminar would enhance a student's first-year experience and address the gaps of social support and communication at the college. Participants felt this course or seminar should continue throughout the year and provide increased programmatic opportunities for students to engage socially and academically. Similarly, Tsui and Gao (2007) indicated positive results regarding

the efficacy of first-year experience programs is positively linked to critical thinking development, as well as other desired outcomes. Their study also found these programs were a particularly powerful way to augment student cognitive growth.

Participants felt this course or seminar could assist students' developmental growth by working with them to improve their social interactions, manage stress and time management more efficiently as well as adapt to difficult situations. Participants shared that the course or seminar needed to show students how to use all the support services the college offers. Many shared that students needed to learn about having access to the Counseling Center for emotional support, Writing Studio for academic support, Advisement Center for course selection support, and Health Services for physical care. Students also mentioned that a mentorship program where upperclassmen are paired with first-year students would be helpful. Participants indicated this mentorship program would allow them to bond with a mentor and ask questions pertaining to their major and social and academic life at FIT. Additionally, participants felt this first-year experience course or seminar could bring in leaders from the fashion industry to present innovative workshops that students would find interesting and beneficial.

Lastly, the results of my study complemented past qualitative studies (Meyer, Spencer, & French, 2009; Stebleton, Jensen, & Peter, 2010; Corella, 2010), quantitative studies (Hendel, 2007; Woolsey & Miller, 2009; Morrow & Ackerman, 2012), and seminal works from Hurtado and Carter (1997) and Strayhorn (2012) and affirmed that a first-year experience program that acclimates students to FIT's campus community would play a beneficial role in helping them to learn, grow, and develop, thus having a positive impact on their sense of belonging.

Limitations

This exploratory study investigated students' first-year experience in relation to support they receive from FIT. While I strived to maintain objectivity by recording my own thoughts into memos, it may be impossible for some biases not to show through in the work because I conducted this study at my home institution. However, I did manage to ensure I only selected participants with whom I had not had previous interactions.

Secondly, given that the 30 participants who were interviewed had expressed an interest in this study, it is possible that they lacked a sense of belonging at FIT. Although the sampling selection procedures for this study were designed to try to limit this possibility, participants' willingness could explain why the interest in a first-year experience program to improve sense of belonging was so high in this study.

Thirdly, this study sought to answer why students lacked a sense of belonging, as indicated on the Student Opinions Survey, which FIT administers every three years. Therefore, this study is very specific to FIT, and findings of the study are not generalizable to other institutions. However, qualitative data regarding students' perceptions of their first-year experience could be used to improve the college experience at other institutions.

Fourthly, this study solely focused on perceptions from participants who resided on campus in the residence halls. Therefore, this provided limited triangulation because it did not take into account perspectives from commuter students, faculty, student affairs educators, or administrators on social support. Perspectives from these sources would provide additional insight that could help FIT provide better support to its students.

Lastly, this study only collected responses from participants who were currently enrolled at FIT. It would be beneficial to collect responses from both current students and students who left FIT to explore how first-year experience can affect retention and persistence.

Recommendations for Future Research

Future research needs to look at the best way to develop a first-year experience program for students at FIT. While students have indicated this program should include more social support, communicative support, and introduction to services at FIT, further research regarding its ideal format and outcomes is still needed. FIT administrators should ensure they are aligning this program with their institutional mission, goals, and strategic priorities.

Secondly, future research should examine campus culture to determine how values, behaviors, and methodologies can affect how a student learns, develops, and thinks about the college. Once FIT administrators understand the campus culture, they can take steps forward to alter aspects that are contributing to this lack of sense of belonging.

Thirdly, future research should look at sense of belonging as it relates to specialized institutions located in an urban environment. It can be difficult for colleges and universities to develop their own campus culture when they have to directly compete for attention with the surrounding city. Therefore, future research should investigate if lack of sense of belonging is endemic to more narrowly focused institutions located in metropolitan areas.

Fourthly, through this study, it was discovered that many students shared poor interactions with departments not typically associated with the first-year experience, such as the Registrar, Bursar, and Financial Aid departments. These interactions negatively influenced students' opinions of their first-year experience at FIT. Therefore, future research needs to

examine how the entire campus community – not just student affairs or academic affairs– impacts a student’s experience and development.

Lastly, it is important that future research address how some institutions have met students’ needs with more robust first-year experience programs. This research would assist institutions with fledging first-year initiatives to understand which aspects of the program are most critical to students’ success.

Recommendations for University Leaders and Policymakers

Through this research and through the Student Opinions Survey that FIT offers, it has been determined that the participants in this study lack a sense of belonging, and they described mixed to poor interactions with staff and students, in addition to poor communicative support regarding the services the college offers. Participants felt a first-year experience program or course would increase a student’s sense of belonging at the college. While this study sought to gain perspectives regarding the components needed in this first-year experience, further research to explore perspectives from faculty, student affairs educators, and administrators would provide additional information and insight. Angelica, a third-year fashion merchandising management student, said:

I think it could be really successful if more research is gathered on specifically what first-year students need now. I feel like what my freshman class needed is different than what the freshman class now needed. I notice differences in everyone, and every generation is a little different. If they specifically go out and see what everyone needs, why people don’t feel like they belong, why they feel like they don’t have support, then that way they’ll be able to cater more to their needs and not have a general program that people have to just fit into.

University leaders and policymakers need to carefully consider what components of a first-year experience program are needed to improve student success and retention. Through this study, it was discovered that positive relationships promote a healthy sense of community. Therefore, administrators need to understand how the entire campus community, including departments not typically associated with the first-year experience, such as the Registrar, Bursar, and Financial Aid departments, can impact students' perceptions about the institution.

Secondly, university leaders and policymakers must examine how they can better communicate their service offerings to students. This study discovered that students enjoyed their experience much more thoroughly when they received proper communicative support from the college and from different departments regarding services that are offered, as well as a more comprehensive orientation to the campus itself and surrounding community.

Thirdly, university leaders and policymakers should explore what students would like to see in a first-year experience program. While it is important for administrators to provide their own input, they sometimes fail to recognize that students can provide valuable suggestions and proper insight into what services they need to improve their success and persistence throughout their college experience.

The results from this study have indicated that FIT needs to improve relationships within the campus community, augment communicative support to its students regarding its programs and services, and seek input from students regarding the services they feel would increase their sense of belonging and improve their experience. Establishing, implementing, and evaluating this first-year experience program will be an extensive endeavor that will take time. However, this program could lead to an improvement in student satisfaction with FIT, which could improve their sense of belonging and communicative support.

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Appendix A

Open-Ended, Semi-Structured Interview Questions Guide

- 1) What types of academic support are available for first-year students at FIT?
- 2) What types of social support are available for first-year students at FIT?
- 3) What types of financial support are available for first-year students at FIT?
- 4) What are your perceptions regarding the creation of a first-year experience program at FIT?
- 5) What components would you like to see included in a first-year experience program at FIT?
- 6) How should this program address student development skills and issues at FIT?
- 7) What are some of the particular challenges that FIT students face in their first year, and how could a first-year experience program lessen these challenges?
- 8) If you were a first-year student, what would you need in this type of program to feel both challenged and supported?
- 9) What is needed to ensure this type of program can cater to a diverse student pool (ethnic/SES) and with different learning needs and expectations?
- 10) What type of impact do you feel this program could have on retention?
- 11) What type of outcome do you think this program will have for the campus and for its students?

Appendix B

Codebook

This codebook was developed to understand students' perceptions of first-year experience in relation to support they receive from the Fashion Institute of Technology.

Label	Climate
Definition	The experience of personal involvement in a system or environment so that persons feel themselves to be an integral part of that system or environment
Description of inclusion and exclusion	<p>Inclusion – For a segment to qualify in a theme, there must be mention of personal involvement in a system or environment, e.g. first year of college atmosphere, orientation, sense of belonging</p> <p>Exclusion – For a segment to be excluded from a theme, there is no mention of personal involvement in a system or environment, e.g. college atmosphere, orientation, sense of belonging</p>
Sub-codes	<p>INTERPERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS: This theme is equated with relationships among people, feelings, and sense of belonging.</p> <p>CAMPUS ENVIRONMENT: This theme is equated with how students speak about the FIT college environment.</p> <p>COMMUNICATIVE SUPPORT: This theme is equated with how FIT communicates support to its students.</p> <p>OPPORTUNITIES: This theme includes opportunities that could better acclimate students to FIT.</p>

Appendix C

Email to Prospective Students

Dear Student:

You are invited to participate in a research study that I will be conducting for a doctoral dissertation through Seton Hall University (Department of Education Leadership, Management, and Policy). This study will explore students' perceptions of first-year experience in relation to support they receive from FIT. I encourage you to read through this letter thoroughly so that you can make an informed decision about your participation.

In order to learn more about students' experiences with the development of this program, I will be conducting a semi-structured audio-recorded individual interview with each participant in the study at a time and place that is convenient for the participant. Your point of view regarding the development of this program will be immensely helpful; I estimate the interview to last no longer than sixty minutes.

While every effort is made to ensure confidentiality, it cannot be absolutely guaranteed. However, all responses will be held in the strictest confidence and every effort will be made to maintain your anonymity. A pseudonym will be assigned to each participant and your responses will only be used for the purposes of this study. To keep data anonymous, the transcript will be stored in a locked cabinet in the researcher's home. Participants may review the audio recordings and transcripts at any time. Any computerized copies of the interview material will be stored on a USB memory device, which will be stored with the printed material. After the research is completed, the audio recordings will be destroyed. Only the researcher for this study will be allowed to access the recordings and transcripts.

Again, your participation in this study will help give me insight regarding the development of a first year experience program at the Fashion Institute of Technology, which is very important. There are no foreseeable risks to your participating in this study and your participation is voluntary; you may withdraw at any time.

I thank you in advance for your time and cooperation. If you are interested in participating in this study, please contact me at Joshua.wilkin@student.shu.edu.

Sincerely,

Joshua Wilkin

Appendix D

First-Year Participant Group Information

Age	Gender	Year	Major	Race
19	Female	First	AMC	White
19	Female	First	FMM	White
18	Female	First	Fashion Design	White
19	Female	First	Visual Exhibition	White
18	Female	First	FMM	Black
19	Female	First	Graphic Design	Asian
19	Female	First	FMM	Hispanic
19	Female	First	FMM	Asian
19	Female	First	FMM	White
20	Male	First	Illustration	Asian

Second-Year Participant Group Information

Age	Gender	Year	Major	Race
19	Female	Second	Fashion Design	Asian
20	Female	Second	Fashion Design	Asian
19	Female	Second	AMC	White
20	Female	Second	FMM	White
20	Female	Second	FMM	Asian
19	Female	Second	FMM	White
20	Female	Second	Home Products	White
21	Female	Second	Illustration	White
22	Female	Second	FMM	Hispanic
20	Male	Second	AMC	White

Third-Year Participant Group Information

Age	Gender	Year	Major	Race
21	Female	Third	Fabric Styling	White
20	Male	Third	AMC	White
20	Female	Third	FMM	White
20	Female	Third	Textile Develop.	White
22	Female	Third	FMM	White
20	Female	Third	Fabric Styling	White
21	Female	Third	AMC	White
20	Female	Third	FMM	Black
21	Female	Third	AMC	Black
21	Female	Third	ITM	White

